

**STUDENT TRUANCY IN AN ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED MIDDLE
SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROOT CAUSES AND INTERVENTIONS
APPLIED**

by

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Student truancy in the United States school system is an epidemic that affects students, schools, families, and communities. Truant students miss out on academic instruction and social interactions, leading to an increased risk of dropping out of school. This case study of truancy focused on middle school students from an economically disadvantaged school district in Southwestern Pennsylvania, and included qualitative and minimal quantitative methods of analysis. Three different methods were utilized, including document and artifact analysis, surveys, and interviews. School, state, and federal policies were analyzed to identify consistencies and discrepancies in truancy reduction policies. School personnel and students were surveyed concerning their perspectives on the sources and consequences of truancy. Additionally, school personnel, truant students, and the parents of those students participated in interviews. Four findings emerged with implications for educational policy and practice to reduce truancy. First, the marginal home environment that supports school attendance is a common “pull-factor” generating truancy. Second, disengagement of students from the school community is prominent, “pushing” some students into truancy. Third, school and community

resources that might be mobilized to reduce truancy are spread thin and do not always reach students in need. Finally, disconnect between school, state, and federal policies and procedures creates gaps in the district's truancy response. Overall, this study highlights the importance of combining supports in the school, home, and community for reducing truancy.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Student truancy is an issue plaguing many schools across the country. Reducing truancy has become a difficult task for schools to undertake. When all three facets of school, home, and community work in tandem, the interventions of each can support the student more effectively, resulting in reduced truancy and increased attendance as indicated in Figure 1 (Spencer, 2009).

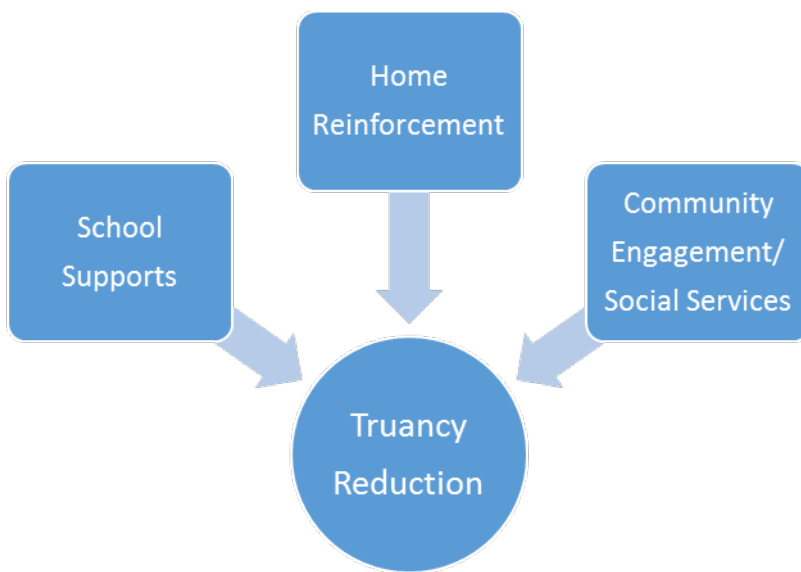


Figure 1. Prongs of support to reduce truancy.

When students are absent from school, they miss valuable instructional time. Several studies correlate high absenteeism rates with poor achievement, placing students at risk of dropping out (Gottfried, 2009; Johnke, 2013; Lamdin, 1996; Roby, 2004). In the first study to find a correlational relationship between attendance and achievement with aggregate data, attendance was evaluated as an independent variable affecting student achievement in Baltimore

city elementary schools (Lamdin, 1996). Roby (2004) utilized the same method in his study of Ohio school districts; he identified a significant but strong correlation between attendance and achievement. McBride and By (2009) took Lamdin's (1996) and Roby's (2004) work further by looking into student grade point average (GPA) and separating the achievement connections by subjects such as math, reading, and science. All three subject areas showed a significant but strong correlation to attendance.

Not only do unlawful absences affect those in the school setting but they also influence the surrounding community. Students who are labeled as truant are at a greater risk for unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, and instability in the home (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). The community as a whole suffers as a result of an unskilled workforce (Lamdin, 1996).

Certain factors put students at a higher risk of becoming truant. A student's home life plays a major factor in school performance. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) believe that a lack of family and community involvement leads to high truancy rates in the school system. This rationale is supported by Antworth's (2008) position that the level of parent involvement forms the basis for the student's educational aspirations. According to Henry (2007), students whose parents were high school dropouts have a 24.9 percent increased risk of truancy by the time they reach the tenth grade. Additionally, students are 30 percent more likely to be truant if they are unsupervised for more than five hours per night (Henry, 2007). Without parent supervision, students are provided with opportunities to engage in at-risk behavior, such as illegal drug activity and alcohol exposure. Henry also found that students who smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or smoke marijuana have a 37 percent increased risk of truancy.

A parent's economic situation directly impacts a student's attendance in school. Socioeconomic status can be a determining factor for chronic truancy (Antworth, 2008). Both Antworth (2008) and Reid (2006) determined that students in single-parent households, in impoverished conditions, in government housing, and/or with frequent residential relocations are at increased risk of truancy. Furthermore, students who qualify for free school lunches as a result of family income have higher rates of truancy (Henry, 2007). Oftentimes, students residing in low-income families hold of in order to help support their families. As a result, students working more than eleven hours per week also have a 21 percent increased risk of truancy (Henry, 2007).

The truancy label can easily be applied to students and, subsequently, the law is used to punish them – but does that resolve the problem? Why are students illegally missing school in the first place? What, if anything, can we do about it? It was not until the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that attendance came to be measured for Annual Yearly Progress and then again with the ESEA Flexibility Waiver that Pennsylvania was granted in 2013 (Education, 2010; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). Monitoring of student attendance serves as an important form of accountability for attendance-related behaviors, thereby reducing truancy rates. This paper will identify interventions that have been proven to increase student attendance, which include three sectors: school provisions, family supports, and community resources. This paper will also identify practices that are not effective in their efforts at increasing school attendance. It is important to note that schools should look at reasons behind the unlawful absences of each individual student before applying specific interventions, as such interventions should be relevant and relate directly to the cause of the absences. Assessment of the specific instances of truancy should always be the first plan of action before assigning any intervention (Teasley, 2004). Truancy is not a one-size-fits-all problem, nor should the solution be.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Attendance is one of the indicators of performance measured by the Pennsylvania School Performance Profile, which replaced Annual Yearly Progress by the ESEA Flexibility Waiver of No Child Left Behind of 2001 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). Since the formal definition of truancy varies by state and without consistency across the country, reporting truancy becomes difficult, minimizing the severity of the problem (Sutphen et al., 2010).

For the purpose of this study, background information needs to be shared in order to better understand the context of the analysis. Compulsory school attendance for Pennsylvania requires students ages eight to seventeen to attend school. Although Kindergarten is not required in Pennsylvania, students can enroll in Kindergarten as early as age five (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1949). The Pennsylvania Public School Code states that any student who misses three or more days of school (unlawfully) in a single year is considered truant. All absences are considered unlawful unless an excuse is provided to the school district that declares the student was unable to attend school due to mental, physical, or other urgent reasons (1949). Lawful absences are not included in the definition of truancy. Previously under the school code, the school district could file truancy charges against the parent. From there, the District Magistrate could impose a fine of up to \$300 or, in extreme circumstances, parents could be sentenced to the county jail for a maximum of five days (1949). Jail sentences have been rare, but the law allowed for them should they be judged necessary.

On November 3, 2016, Act 138 of 2016 was approved. The goal of the act is to reduce truancy and improve attendance by identifying attendance issues and intervening as soon as they begin. Interventions include sending a warning letter to parents after the first unexcused absence, holding a school attendance improvement conference after three unexcused absences, and filing citations for truancy after six unexcused absences. Habitually truant is defined as six or more unexcused absences under the new legislation.

In addition to compulsory school attendance laws, Pennsylvania requires each school district to implement attendance policies that coincide with the law. Pennsylvania is currently revising the basic education circular, or BEC, on truancy to provide the necessary guidance to school districts, signifying the importance of reducing truancy at the state level.

2.1 SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE TRUANCY

2.1.1 Academic supports

Academic struggles can be either symptom or cause of unlawful absences. Students who get behind in their coursework or struggle with content are more likely to skip school as they become disengaged by academic pressure (Teasley, 2004). On the other hand, students with high absenteeism for other reasons are more likely to perform poorly as they get behind, missing the crucial instruction needed to be successful (Reid, 2006). For either situation, the end result remains the same: Students with high unlawful absenteeism are at-risk for poor academic achievement.

Throughout the literature there are a few suggestions to support students in their academic endeavors while trying to get their attendance on track. These include tutoring, flexible scheduling, policy revisions, and referrals for extra services, such as bilingual education and special education. One model of incorporating these strategies can be seen in a peer-mentoring program like the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. According to Teasley (2004), the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program utilized a cross-aged tutoring model connecting older students with younger ones. The program took students at risk of dropping out, recruited them as tutors, and placed them with younger students on the same trajectory in order to support both types of students (older and younger) in their academic pursuits. The idea behind the program was to increase attendance and reduce dropout rates while also improving academic performance. Students in the test group had a 1 percent dropout rate compared to the control group, whose dropout rate was 12 percent (Teasley, 2004). The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program claims that 98 percent of its tutors remained in school. Cross-aged peer tutoring has shown to be beneficial in promoting student attendance and academic performance for both the tutor and tutored students.

Increasing tutoring opportunities for those students at risk also minimizes the need for summer school or credit recovery and the downward spiral that often results from the feeling of failure. Both Spencer (2009) and Haight et al. (2014) agree that increasing tutoring opportunities to include peer, cross-aged, and teacher-student options for academic support will increase the number of graduates and, at the same time, reduce the need for programs such as summer school and credit recovery. Increased academic support also eliminates the need for social promotion and retention policies that often leave children lacking (2009, 2014). Additionally, Haight, et al. determined that students who met for regularly scheduled tutoring sessions, as opposed to

tutoring on an as-needed basis were more likely to increase school attendance and improve performance, much like the Coca-Cola program described by Teasley (2004).

Students with learning disabilities as well as bilingual students struggle more to achieve academic success, especially when needed supports are absent. Spencer (2009) found that students with special needs are more likely to miss school unlawfully. Late identification in the early elementary years, coupled with limited or absent interventions, leaves this student population at a larger risk of truancy. Spencer studied individual eighth-grade students who had significantly high absenteeism rates in an urban school district. Many of the students lacked services for severe learning disabilities in the primary years as well as increased instances of social promotions. Students were also retained without special education services. Had those services been available, those students might have been successful and remained engaged in school.

Take student “Jessica,” for example; she was part of a bilingual program early in her education. She was moved to a monolingual classroom, where her decline in attendance began (Spencer, 2009). From second grade, there was no evidence of any type of monitoring or academic intervention to help Jessica as she was performing grossly below grade level and had been socially promoted in grades four and five (Spencer, 2009). It is interesting to note that on a seventh grade IQ test, “Jessica tested at a superior range of 120 while her verbal IQ was a low 80. Due to the higher non-verbal IQ, any extra services were dropped” (p. 315). Jessica told the test administrator that “[s]he was tired of looking stupid” (p.315). Her average attendance rate ranged from 70 to 75 percent. With the necessary supports in the early years, Jessica likely could have been academically successful with a higher attendance rate (Spencer, 2009).

When students experience gaps in their education and yet move to the next grade level, they lack the skills to be successful and the achievement gap is widened, increasing the risk for truancy and subsequent dropout (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Haight, et al., 2014; Reid, 2006; Spencer, 2009). Providing academic supports builds positive relationships with school, increases engagement, and builds confidence in students, all of which lead to increased attendance.

2.1.2 Monitoring

Students at-risk for truancy need someone to keep them accountable, such as a counselor, teacher, or mentor who meets with them on a weekly basis to focus on attendance but also on the factors that enable their absenteeism and the interventions in place to reduce it (Haight et al., 2014; Reid, 2006; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Having this individual personal connection creates school engagement for the student, which results in higher attendance rates and increased academic achievement, thus eliminating alienation and disconnect from the school environment (Marvul, 2012; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Schools often look to potential mentors inside the school system who as well as outside volunteers from organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (Marvul, 2012). When students have someone other than family members counting on them, they have an intrinsic motivation to perform better, as they do not want to let that other person down (Marvul, 2012).

However, when mentoring and monitoring are reduced to maintenance levels once the student has met initial expectations, the student becomes at risk for truancy once again (Teasley, 2004). As students begin to decrease their attendance, both monitoring and mentoring should increase to appropriate levels, such that the student also increases their attendance and academic performance to the same standard (Sutphen et al., 2010). Careful monitoring at both the initial

and maintenance phases will reduce a lapse in service in hopes that the student does not slide too far backwards (2010).

2.1.3 Positive reinforcements

In general, school-age students respond well to behavioral incentives. Through motivational theory, reinforcements such as incentives can be utilized to increase attendance and improve academic performance in the school setting. Some incentives have a higher return rate than others. Finding a reason for students to want to come to school would serve to improve attendance (Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Using sports participation in an urban high school as an incentive for student attendance, Marvul (2012) found that the incentive needs to relate to the context. Marvul (2012) conducted a study in an urban male high school where 97 percent of the student population included disadvantaged African-American students; he determined participation in a competitive sports program was enough of an incentive for students to come to school and engage in academics. This positive reinforcement helped students in their school pursuits. However, while there is much research on motivation, the field is limited in relation to student attendance and reducing truancy.

2.1.4 Moral education

As discussed earlier, students are absent from school for a variety of reasons. One reason involves negative peer relationships, which greatly impact a student's willingness to attend school. Bullying has become a part of everyday life in public education. There is limited research on how bullying impacts attendance, as most studies have primarily focused on psychosocial

effects of bullying (Gastic, 2008). In Gastic's (2008) research, students who are victims of bullying are at a 58 percent increased risk for being truant. In addition, Gastic noted that students who are victims also suffer from poor academic achievement or declining academic performance.

In order to combat the effects of bullying, schools should look to the root cause and extinguish the undesired behaviors in the first place. Adding topics of moral education to the curriculum, including social media training, behavior modification, bullying prevention, and character education would support a positive school climate so that all students would want to attend school and develop positive peer interactions (Gastic, 2008; Marvul, 2012). Targeting citizenship, responsibility, leadership, and fairness in the school curriculum led to dramatic increases in attendance (45 percent) as well as improvement in self-concept (43 percent) in Marvul's (2012) research. The curriculum focused on moral leadership: Students were to think of themselves as leaders and consider how they want to be seen by their peers (2012).

Gastic (2008) argued that schools should explore interventions that focus on behavior modification of known bullies as well as addressing bully victimization with all students. As technology progresses, schools should also look outside the school building, as bullying continues after the school day is over through social media. Teaching students how to be Internet responsible will reduce the instances when students are bullied online, thus decreasing the number of absences from bully victimization (Gastic, 2008).

In conjunction with bullying prevention and Internet responsibility programs, K-12 character education programs have shown promise in reducing negative behavior in schools, which, in turn, has a positive effect on peer relationships. Creating a positive environment of mutual respect and support reduces the risk of truancy by increasing school engagement and

further developing constructive peer and teacher relations (Gastic, 2008; Marvul, 2012). In Marvul's (2012) research at an urban high school that used character education to address attendance, an inverse relationship existed between absenteeism and optimistic attitudes towards educational engagement.

2.1.5 School support to families

Families can reinforce the efforts made during the school day, generating another layer of accountability for students. Schools can develop strong relationships with parents in many ways, including parent workshops, home visits, daily communication, regular weekly meetings, and the like (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Haight et al., 2014; Reid, 2006; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004).

Communication with families is vital to success in all avenues of a child's education. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) believe that student high absenteeism rates are a direct result of limited family involvement. Much like weekly monitoring with the student, the school should enact daily communication through email or phone to the family when a child is absent (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Haight et al., 2014; Teasley, 2004). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) reported an 11 percent increase in attendance when phone calls were made to the home when the student was absent. Daily communication will increase parent involvement, leading to an increase in academic success starting with higher attendance rates. Communication should begin as early as Kindergarten in order to reinforce the importance of attendance and positive family relationships before truancy becomes an irreversible chronic problem (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

When schools employ a home school visitor as an intervention for those chronically absent, it bridges the gap for families who cannot be reached via the usual phone and email

methods. Home school visitors have shown positive effects for reducing unlawful absences in those students who are chronically absent, but they do little to improve the daily attendance rate in schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Haight et al. (2014) supports the use of a home school visitor for improving attendance but does not specify its effects on the daily attendance rate. Sutphen et al. (2010) also cautions the use of a home school visitor. While home visits are effective for some chronically absent students, it is not an intervention that works for all. Students and families may not be home at the time of the visit or they may choose not to answer the door (Sutphen et al., 2010). It is recommended that the home school visitor never make the visits alone; someone else such as a local police officer, school resource officer, and/or security guard should also attend (Haight et al., 2014; Sutphen et al., 2010). This precaution is for the safety of both the home school visitor and the family they are visiting.

Schools can offer workshops to parents in order to inform them of attendance policies, procedures, consequences for absences, and resources available to assist with getting the child to school. The effectiveness of these workshops is dependent upon the topic as well as the background of the families participating. The school needs to know the families and the surrounding community in order to develop the most effective workshops. The research is very limited as to the effectiveness of parent workshops. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) offer the only seemingly relevant resource on this subject. Increasing opportunities for family engagement in the school by flexibility with parent availability could be beneficial; however, there may be some costs to offering parent workshops as they would often be scheduled after school hours and could be poorly attended, particularly in schools where parent involvement is already limited (2002).

In an era when schools are looking to maximize their capital, getting the “most bang for their buck,” other interventions such as phone calls to communicate daily student attendance may

be more fruitful in generating higher student attendance and increased parent involvement. More research needs to be conducted in this area before proceeding with an effective research-based intervention to improve student attendance.

2.2 FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS TO REDUCE TRUANCY

2.2.1 Coordination of social services

In addition to supports offered by the school, outside community agencies can help families in need. These agencies are designed to address the root causes of truancy and can include mental health support, healthcare services, crime victim intervention, children and youth services, drug and alcohol organizations, juvenile justice systems, and law enforcement. While no one solution addresses the root causes in the home, a comprehensive approach that includes a variety of services to support the family will result with improvement in both family and school relations (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Flaherty et al., 2012; Spencer, 2009; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004).

Act 138 of 2016 provides an avenue for the justice system to get involved with families after the school has issued multiple truancy citations. Here the legal system can support families by mandating interventions such as family therapy, juvenile probation, and participation in community-based truancy reduction programs. An example of a community-based program is Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT), a statewide program in Arizona designed to combat unlawful absences. ACT is built on three principles: accountability for both parents and students, addressing the root cause of the unlawful absences, and prohibitions to the individuals guilty of

truancy (Teasley, 2004). This program garnered success through the careful coordination of school and community to support the families in need. Students were referred to this program when they accrued three or more unexcused absences. Once referred, families were admitted into a diversion program that included parenting skills as well as youth support and leadership groups and a delayed court date for the families. Successful completion of the program usually meant a dismissal of legal citations (Teasley, 2004). This example is one of many in which community outreach programs work with families and schools to support students. Teasley (2004) cautions that each program must be evaluated independently and within the context of services provided.

As mentioned previously, students are at a greater risk for truancy if drugs and alcohol are involved and/or if there is a lack of mental health services or medical health services for the family (Henry, 2007). In order to combat this cause of truancy, the research recommends community-based health services such as drug and alcohol counseling, mental health wraparound services, and access to medical care to address family needs (Haight et al., 2014; Spencer, 2009; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). In addition to these community-based services, offering parenting classes and personal growth classes for both parents and children could also address potential substance abuse, effect positive family and school relationships, and improve school attendance (Flaherty et al., 2012). The caveat in these cases is that most of these programs are voluntary and the family has to want the services in order for them to be successful in reducing school truancy (Sutphen et al., 2010). It is often beneficial to offer these services in conjunction with the judicial system in order to guarantee participation (Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004).

2.3 INEFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS TO COMBAT STUDENT TRUANCY

2.3.1 School policies

While there are multiple intervention supports, systemic changes can be implemented to support students who are truant in hopes of eliminating the barriers and getting them back on track. The language of certain policies (e.g., promotion and retention, attendance, as well as homework and assessment) creates a barrier that makes it more difficult for students who are already falling behind. Spencer (2009) highlighted the importance of reviewing policies to ensure that students are not being pushed away any further. One example mentioned earlier involves promotion and retention policies. Spencer mentioned a school with a promotion and retention policy that only allowed students to be retained once in primary elementary school and again once in intermediate elementary school (Spencer, 2009). Students could move to the next grade level even if they did not demonstrate the skills needed for the following year, furthering the achievement gap (Spencer, 2009). In such cases, truancy becomes the symptom and not the cause of poor academic performance. When students experience learning gaps, they easily become frustrated and disengaged, increasing the risk of unlawful absences (Spencer, 2009).

In reviewing attendance policies, Reid (2006) suggests that tying grades to attendance hinders student achievement and increases student truancy through the disengagement that results from failure. A few studies discuss attendance policies tied in with academic records. For example, Reid cites one policy in which students lose the credit for the course regardless of the grade they earned if they have missed a certain number of days of school, regardless of the reason for the absences. Another instance includes penalties to student grades if they miss a certain number of days; for example, a student misses five school days and the grade for the

course is dropped from an A to a B (Gage & Deloreto, 2013). This situation impacts a student's motivation to perform when they are in attendance, let alone making up any assignments missed while the student was absent. This creates another instance when the student continues to be absent as a result of continual academic failure, creating a "hamster wheel" effect that spirals into a trajectory of unrelenting failure (Gage & Deloreto, 2013). Future studies of student motivation compounding the effect of student absenteeism derived from zero tolerance policies would benefit the field.

The ineffectiveness of make-up work or missed assignment policies designed to improve attendance can actually broaden the achievement gap (Teasley, 2004). This is evident with policies that establish guidelines for make-up work, in which students with excused absences have a certain number of days to make up missed assignments; with those absences that are considered unexcused or illegal, the policies do not allow time to make up the missed assignment, further penalizing and driving the student to a deeper level of school disengagement (Teasley, 2004). Some argue that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective for reducing chronic truancy as they only accelerate the path to dropout for those students who are already at-risk (Gage & Deloreto, 2013; Reid, 2006; Spencer, 2009; Teasley, 2004). Marvul (2012) supports this claim as such policies have targeted minority factions in schools, creating the "school to prison pipeline" as minority poverty-stricken males are most susceptible to zero-tolerance policies (p.145).

2.3.2 Community incentives

An urban school district in California joined a county organization to implement a policy that made public assistance contingent on students attending school (Finnegan, 2002). The policy, the

School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP), was sponsored by the San Diego County of Social Services in conjunction with the San Diego Unified School District (2002). It required students over the age of 16 who received public assistance to attend school regularly or have their funding cut (Finnegan, 2002). The premise behind it was to provide a platform for students to improve their academic achievement by attending school regularly with the eventual outcome of the students being able to provide for themselves without the need of public assistance programs (Finnegan, 2002).

This study was conducted at one particular site where two public-assistance conditions were tested: increases in school attendance and high school graduation. Adding attendance as a condition for public assistance improved student daily attendance from 3 percent to 9 percent, but it did not yield the academic results the program had initially hoped for (Finnegan, 2002). Unfortunately, graduation rates did not increase to the level of statistical significance for those students with the public assistance incentive. Finnegan believes that the goal of the SADP of reducing poverty and increasing self-sufficiency was not met with this program; however, it did meet its goal of reducing truancy. Due to the absence of academic achievement with this intervention, I classify it as ineffective since the goal of school attendance is to promote academic performance for productive citizenry.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the ESEA Flexibility Waiver for Pennsylvania of 2012, the need to perform well on high-stakes tests is stronger than ever (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). The bar has been raised on increasing

student achievement across the board, and schools are feeling the pressure. Student engagement in the classroom is of utmost importance to academic performance. When students are not present in school, it impacts their achievement and subsequent learning.

The importance of student attendance is supported by the need for academic performance in school that will subsequently benefit the surrounding community. Students who are at-risk for truancy are placed on a trajectory for dropping out (Henry, 2007). This finding is supported by research that states that those “students who are truant will eventually burden their communities socially, criminally, and culturally” (Marvul, 2012, p. 145).

Identifying which interventions work best to fight student truancy is the first step of many in reducing unlawful absenteeism. While some interventions work better than others, the research indicates that any action a school may take is better than inaction, as *some* progress will be achieved. Regardless of the intervention utilized, targeting the root causes of unlawful absenteeism will be the best defense in combatting truancy, especially when it is the cause and not the symptom of poor achievement (Teasley, 2004). Before schools apply interventions to targeted individuals, an assessment should be conducted to identify the causes of student absences and the barriers for particular students (Reid, 2006; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004).

Individual interventions can work to reduce truancy; however, when collectively applied, progress will be realized. Spencer (2009) argues that academic supports should be coupled with community agencies in order to tackle the issue in home and at school: “Academic solutions should not be made in isolation of the need for emotional supports” (2009, p. 319). Taking a three-pronged approach with school, family, and community working together will lead to the most effective interventions (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Spencer, 2009; Teasley, 2004). Teasley

(2004) also suggests that the context in which interventions are applied must be evaluated prior to implementation in order to ensure that they adequately address the root cause of the truancy and not simply the symptom. The question remains as to which interventions work best in specific contexts and which work well in concert with one another to create the intended outcome of reduced student truancy.

The unfortunate side of these interventions is that some require a willingness to participate; they will only work when the student and the family are willingly and actively seeking the change the school desires to the benefit of academic performance (Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Parental involvement is a key factor in supporting academic success, which makes it critical for schools to find ways to support parents (Antworth, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Haight et al., 2014; Teasley, 2004). Enhancing communication and relationships that fully engage parents will aid in the recruitment and willingness of families to participate in truancy reduction interventions. Student engagement in school also plays a critical role as classroom instruction, school climate, and peer relations can impact the student's attendance.

2.5 INQUIRY QUESTIONS

For the purpose of this study the following questions will be addressed:

1. What are the root causes of truancy in an economically disadvantaged Southwestern Pennsylvania Middle School according to the following stakeholders:
 - a. Students
 - b. Parents or guardians of truant students

- c. School personnel including administration, guidance counselor, teachers, and social workers
- 2. What interventions effectively reduce truancy and increase student attendance for the root causes specified in question one in an economically disadvantaged Southwestern Pennsylvania Middle School?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 outlines the study into two parts through the *inquiry approach* and the *applied inquiry plan*. The inquiry approach section details the design, setting, and methods of the study while the applied inquiry plan will connect the inquiry questions to the method and subsequent analysis that took place after data collection commenced.

3.1 INQUIRY APPROACH

3.1.1 Inquiry design

The approach for this inquiry was a case study, employing qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, focused on middle school students. It is through this case study that the following theory will be examined: Students in an economically disadvantaged middle school are truant as a result of a complex relationship in which the students disengage from school, without regard for self, parent, school, or legal consequences. In order to reduce truancy of these students, a combination of home visits by the social worker, as well as accountability and positive reinforcement from the school will result in reduced truancy. With improved attendance and engagement in the classroom, students will increase their academic performance.

The study focused on student attendance data from the 2015-16 school year and relied on three methods: document and artifact analysis, surveys of students and school personnel, and interviews with truant students, their parents or guardians, and school personnel.

3.1.2 Inquiry setting

The Smith Area Middle School¹ is located in Southwestern Pennsylvania, where the student population is considered highly economically disadvantaged. Seventy percent of the student body qualifies for free and reduced lunch, and the student attendance rate (86 percent) falls below the Pennsylvania state average of 90 percent. The middle school is located in a county where community resources are scarce and the risk factors for truancy are commonplace. Community resources include the legal system as well as the Johnson County Crime Victims' Center and mental health organizations for those who qualify. As a result of poor student attendance, academic achievement and growth suffer. Not only does unlawful absenteeism affect those in the school setting but it also affects the surrounding community. Students who are labeled as truant are at a greater risk for unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, committing crime, and instability in the home (Sutphen et al., 2010). The community also suffers as a result from a poor economy due to an unskilled workforce (Lamdin, 1996).

¹ All of the school, organization, and participant names presented in this study are pseudonyms.

3.1.3 Inquiry methods

For the artifact analysis component of this study, a document protocol was utilized (see Appendix A). Several artifacts were analyzed and included the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Basic Education Circular (BEC) on truancy, Act 138 of 2016, passed on November 3, 2016, the school district's attendance policy, overall student attendance data, and field notes from school officials' interventions. Official documents are identified as policies, student attendance and truancy data, and correspondence from the school. Unofficial documents are identified as field notes that include home school visits.

The study utilized participants in two of the methods, surveys and interviews; the survey participants are students and school personnel. Two classes of students, approximately forty students, were sampled for a brief survey. The classes selected were electives in order to ensure a mix of grade levels and students considered to be truant and non-truant. Utilizing the computer lab and the University of Pittsburgh Qualtrics Survey System, the students were asked questions including how often they missed school during the previous school year, the reasons for the absences, the student's history of truancy citations, as well as general attendance perception questions regarding why they think students are absent from school and what can be done to get students to school more frequently (see Appendix B.1). The other survey participants include half of the middle school personnel. This list is comprised of all teachers in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. They were asked questions that pertain to the school district's efforts to improve attendance, such as the interventions employed, the attendance policy, and their perceptions and thoughts on whether the school is doing enough or what can be done. They were also asked why they believe students are excessively unlawfully absent and what they have personally done to combat this type of absenteeism (see Appendix B.2).

For the second method of this study, the interview, there were three groups of participants: habitually truant students, their parents, and a select number of school personnel. Four students scheduled to see the magistrate for a truancy hearing in the fall, based on infractions from the 2015-2016 school year, were interviewed with follow-up separate interviews with their parents or guardians. The interview questions addressed why the students were absent from school the previous school year, what interventions were applied in their cases, reasons why the interventions were successful or not, and what they believe could be done to improve attendance (see Appendix C.1). The students' parents answered a similar line of questioning that additionally contain what the parents or guardians have done to get the child to school (see Appendix C.2). The last group of participants includes school personnel. Four volunteer teachers, the guidance counselor, and school principal were interviewed. They were asked questions regarding their role in affecting student attendance in the school, what they believe are the reasons for truancy, and what they believe would reduce truancy (see Appendix C.3).

3.2 APPLIED INQUIRY PLAN

The following chart coordinates the specific inquiry questions with the method utilized and the analysis that followed upon completion of the data collection.

Table 1. Analysis and Interpretation.

Inquiry Questions	Evidence/Method	Analysis
1a	<p>Interview with students who were referred to the local magistrate for truancy for the 2015-16 school year. Since approximately 70 students are referred to the magistrate, four students will be selected based on truancy hearings and permission to participate. Student names will be pulled from the October 2016 hearing docket.</p> <p>-Electronic survey of 40 students from two classes that include sixth, seventh, and eighth grade of both truant and non-truant students in the middle school: Question topics include if the students have ever been referred to the magistrate for truancy, why they come to school, why they do not come to school, and incentives that would encourage them to engage with positive school attendance.</p>	<p>-Root causes of truancy were identified within the context of the study.</p> <p>-The interventions that were successful to reduce truancy were recognized as well as those that were unproductive. Data was compared with the literature upon interpretation and reporting. Inferences were drawn on whether or not the successful interventions could be applied across multiple settings and various root causes. The main root causes will consist of student responses that cited a minimal number of pull factors that bring students to school as well as situations in the home environment that push students away.</p>
1b	<p>- Interviews with four parents whose children have been referred to the magistrate for truancy for the 2015-2016 school year that focuses on why the students are absent from school. Due to the larger number of referrals to the magistrate, the parents of those students who are chosen for interviews will be interviewed as well.</p>	<p>-Similar analysis and interpretation as above occurred with the parents of those students in an effort to look at a perspective opposite of the students but still outside of the school setting. The parents reported severe circumstances that pulled students away from school as well as some defiant behavior as the main root causes.</p>
1c	<p>- Electronic survey of teachers (approximately 35) using questions regarding their perceptions of the reasons for truancy, beliefs about effective interventions, and their efforts to reduce student truancy.</p> <p>- Interviews with volunteer teachers, guidance counselor, building principal, school psychologist, and social worker.</p>	<p>-Similar analysis and interpretation as mentioned above with both students and parents occurred with the school personnel, in an effort to look at a perspective within the school setting. School personnel reported limited parent involvement, poor school engagement, and a need for additional school and community resources to support parents as the main effective intervention.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Student attendance data from the 2015-2016 school year.-Documents that outline which interventions were applied such as the school attendance policy, dates of home school visits, and any additional documentation of when an intervention was applied.- Interviews with students, parents, and school personnel that elaborate on interventions and why they worked or did not work to reduce student truancy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Similar analysis and interpretation as mentioned above with the all of the participants occurred, as well as review of the artifacts to determine if policy supports or deters truancy reduction. Inferences were drawn on policy implications for future application for consistency across the school, state, and federal levels.
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4.0 MAJOR FINDINGS

4.1 OVERVIEW

During this study, the Pennsylvania State Legislature discussed and passed legislation regarding truancy. For many years, school districts have had limited guidance or oversight from the state. The passing of Act 138 of 2016, which occurred during the data collection phase of this study, shows a renewed interest at the state level in school attendance. This, in part, may be due to increased pressures for schools to perform and meet accountability standards. Federal legislation is responsible for some of this pressure with the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) that replaces No Child Left Behind Act (2001) by requiring schools to report chronic absenteeism rates. One factor behind schools' struggles to meet accountability requirements is poor student attendance, which directly affects student learning and performance on standardized assessments. This problem not only affects the individual schools and school districts, but also the state level. The upward trickle effect is felt when the state does not meet benchmarks, as it is cause for increased scrutiny by both the constituents and the federal government, which can negatively impact funding.

The original data collection plan called for ten students and their parents to be interviewed. Due to the level of difficulty experienced in reaching and communicating with parents, that number was reduced to four each. Phone numbers had been disconnected, and

families often failed to show up for their truancy hearings before the local magistrate, the anticipated connection point for gathering data. The intention was to interview three teachers (one per grade level), but four teachers volunteered to assist. They included two special education teachers who teach all three grade levels, a sixth grade math teacher, and a business teacher who instructs seventh and eighth grade students. Of the surveys, 32 participants responded out of the 40 students invited, and only 18 of the 35 teachers responded. While the response rate was 51 percent for teachers, a higher response was anticipated. The data gained from both surveys was enough to conduct a proper analysis. Due to small sample sizes, tests for statistical significance were not conducted as they could have resulted in a Type II error, in which the null hypothesis is false and accepted as true, altering the findings and leading to false conclusions.

The questions were designed to elicit teacher, parent, and student understandings of the root causes of truancy. Policy documents and survey and interview data were examined to identify common factors in the home and school environments that generate (or fail to address) problems of truancy. Four findings derived from the data. First, there is a disconnect between state and school district policy. Second, there are substantial problems with student engagement in the school. Third, there is a shortage of school and community resources to address truancy. Finally, there are minimal structure supports in the home environment. The findings will be discussed in detail below.

4.2 FINDING 1: DISCONNECT OF POLICY AMONG ENTITIES

A comparison of state policies and the school district's policies and procedures show a clear disconnect between the two entities. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) previous Basic Education Circular on Student Attendance and Truancy and the recently signed Act 138 of 2016 by the state of Pennsylvania were reviewed alongside the school district's attendance policy to analyze consistency among the policies. Act 138 of 2016 was approved on November 3, 2016. The goal of Act 138 is to reduce truancy and to improve attendance through credible interventions as early as possible. Interventions include sending warning letters home to parents after the third unexcused absence, holding a school attendance improvement conference after the first unexcused absence following the warning but prior to a student becoming habitually truant, and filing citations for truancy after six unexcused absences, when the student has become habitually truant even with implementation of the school attendance improvement plan. It is a proactive approach to a problem that can become uncontrollable without early intervention.

One of the glaring inconsistencies includes the procedure for addressing student truancy. The school district policy states that students with five unexcused absences should receive a written warning, while the Pennsylvania Department of Education makes it clear that students should receive a written warning after the third unexcused absence. Furthermore, the school district refers students to the local magistrate after ten unexcused absences through a truancy citation and then for every five unexcused absences thereafter. In contrast, the law states that truancy citations may be filed after six unexcused absences with a truancy elimination plan in place.

Unfortunately, a truancy elimination plan is never mentioned in the school district's attendance policy. In fact, there is no mention of a truancy elimination plan being developed for any student considered truant, nor was there mention of such in the surveys or interviews. The Pennsylvania Department of Education developed a Truancy Elimination Toolkit for school districts to utilize in combating truancy. When interviewing the principal and guidance counselor, neither knew the toolkit existed. They were mindful that the law was changing but were unaware of the specifics. The guidance counselor did ask for information on the toolkit so she can utilize it in her work with truant students. This finding leads to the conclusion that the school is not utilizing the research-based interventions recommended in the toolkit, leaving no evidence of interventions for the 2015-2016 school year or earlier. In the interview with the district's superintendent, he needed to be refreshed on what the toolkit was and how it was to be utilized. He was unaware that no one in the middle school was using it. The superintendent did know that a new law was put into place and needed to be implemented for the following school year: "That's something we'll tackle in the summer. I'm not worried about it right now." He cited rumors that other school districts in the county were planning on getting together to discuss their respective school districts' response but was unsure when that was going to happen.

The Basic Education Circular for Student Attendance and Truancy states that a Home School Visitor position is required for school districts across the state. The school district does employ a home school visitor; however, the person in this role wears many hats. He doubles as a district social worker whose duties additionally include being the homeless liaison for McKinney-Vento Homeless Education and Fostering Connections with Children Youth Services. He and the school resource officer go to student homes when they have missed 10 or more consecutive days and are on the verge of being dropped from enrollment. If he is unable to

complete this duty, which happens approximately 50 percent of the time, the Chief of School Police will make the visits himself, according to the building principal. The school resource officer is a full-time officer with the local municipality, and the Chief of School Police is a part-time elected Constable. This is likely not the intent of the language included in the Basic Education Circular for Student Attendance and Truancy, which states that a home school visitor is a mandatory school district position. In the teacher survey, participants were asked how they recommend improving student attendance. Six of the teachers responded with increasing the use of the home school visitor. This is a challenge the school district would need to resolve.

With No Child Left Behind of 2001 in need of reauthorization, new legislation was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015. As part of this legislation, The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA states must report chronic absenteeism as well as let schools utilize their federal dollars to reduce student absenteeism through staff training. Act 138 of 2016 came as a result of ESSA and states looking forward to implementing the new regulation.

Using Act 138 of 2016 as the launch to be implemented in 2017-2018, the Pennsylvania Department of Education is taking a tougher stance on unlawful student absences with a focus on positive reinforcement as opposed to punitive actions. A school attendance improvement conference must occur with a plan in place before a truancy citation can be filed. From the conference, a school attendance improvement plan would be developed in collaboration with school, parent, and student. Local magistrates are not to accept citations without a plan attached. Additionally, referrals to Children Youth Services for those under the age of 15 are part of the new regulation. This requirement was in the old policy; however, it was considered a recommendation and not a requirement, resulting in limited follow-through. The school district's policy does not mention referrals to Children Youth Services nor have there been documented

efforts to refer students due to truancy. Act 138 of 2016 also made changes to another Pennsylvania Department of Education Basic Education Circular, Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth. Previously, truancy was one of the seven reasons a student could be referred to an alternative education program for disruptive youth (AEDY). Under the new regulation, this referral is no longer allowable. Students may be referred to other school settings that encourage positive reinforcement and attendance as part of the student's school attendance improvement plan, but they cannot be connected to an alternative education program for disruptive youth. This change does not impact the school district in this study, as they did not refer truant students to an AEDY program.

With changes in administration at the federal level, the future of ESSA and how states respond is in jeopardy. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will be facing a gubernatorial election next year, and board of school directors' elections are taking place this year. The potential shift in political ideology puts school district responses to truancy in limbo as consistency across administrations and subsequent regulations remain in flux. In the meantime, school districts must create a response to the current regulation to be ready for implementation in the following school year.

4.3 FINDING 2: PROBLEMS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL

The literature recommends connecting students to their school as a suggested practice to reduce truancy (Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). For this study, evidence was combined from school personnel and student surveys and interviews. Student lack of engagement in the school setting may be a reason for absenteeism.

4.3.1 Student data

In the survey, students were given two choices as to why they were absent from school in order to illustrate push or pull factors. These factors indicate reasons for avoiding or attending school. They had to select one of two responses: 1) they do not attend because they are not a school type person and do not look forward to school, or 2) their family situation makes it difficult to attend. The responses are almost evenly split, as indicated in Figure 2, which shows that over half of the students responded with school avoidance citing their lack of engagement in school. While this is a sample of the student population, the variability of student responses indicates that there are different reasons behind unlawful absences.

Additionally, students were asked to cite the top three reasons for student absenteeism in general. The top three responses were doctor's appointments, oversleeping, and missing the bus. The responses are shown in Figure 3.

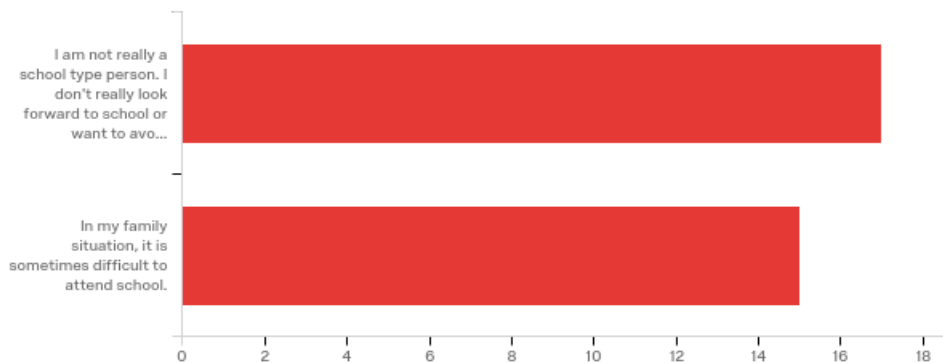


Figure 2. Student responses to the factors affecting their attendance.

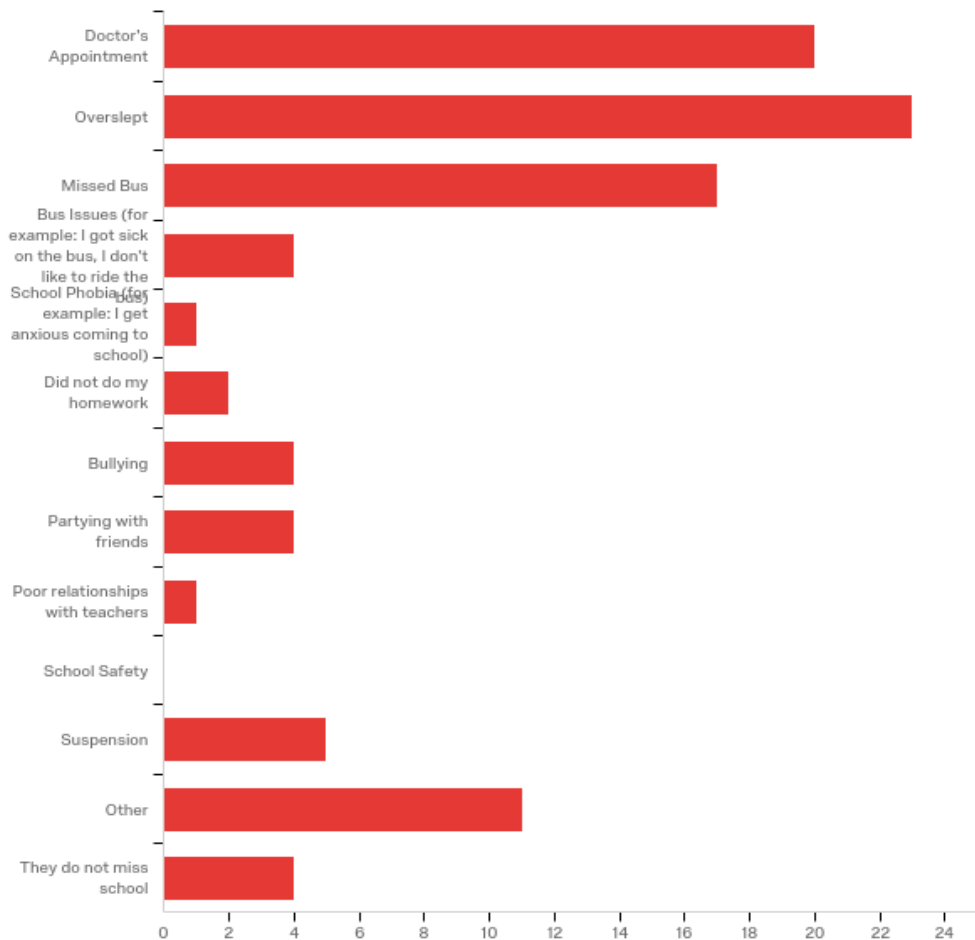


Figure 3. Reasons students miss school.

When students were asked about student absenteeism in general, eight of the 32 participants stated that students do not want to come to school because they do not care about school and do not have any real connections: “They find no reason to be here and do not believe their education is important.”

Further data analysis from the student surveys indicate that students overwhelmingly do not believe the school does enough to improve student attendance. Of the 32 respondents, only two students feel the school is doing enough.

When probed on what the school can do to promote student attendance, 19 of the 32 participants stated that they would like “free time” for socializing. Currently, the school schedule

includes eight periods a day for 42 minutes each. Students have one 30-minute lunch period. This is the only unstructured time in the students' schedules. While it is considered by the administration "free" time, it is still somewhat structured; during the lunch period, students are told where to sit, when to eat, how loud they are permitted to be, and more. There is a possibility in many cases that the peer students sit with may not be their friends, as more than half of the suggestions from the open-ended question include being allowed 20 to 30 minutes to socialize with friends or peers of their choosing.

Creating courses in areas such as fine and practical arts was another suggestion made by 14 of the 32 respondents. Schedules are predominantly academic, with one period of electives that could include Spanish I, Business/Entrepreneurship, Career Exploration, or Technology Education. Music, choir, band, and art are courses that the middle school once offered but have been cut from the budget. Courses such as music, the fine arts, and the practical arts, all of which encourage creativity, were not always minimized at the middle school. Like many school districts, the financial crisis that erupted across the economy pinched the pennies of the school district. Budget cuts forced administrators and school board directors to make decisions that may not have been in the best interest of students but were needed for financial sustainability. As a result, courses not required by Chapter 4 regulations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education were eliminated. Early retirement incentives were offered to eliminate higher teacher salaries and benefits, and positions were not replaced. The casualty of these moves involved two full time music teachers and the art teacher. To fill the gaps in the schedule, academic electives were added, such as English enrichment, math enrichment, and a writing workshop. Physical education was also reduced, leaving students with limited opportunities to unwind or expend some energy during the school day. The middle school also used to employ a full-time librarian.

This position was reduced to part-time, leaving students with limited access to this resource. While there is no direct correlation between the reduction of classes or resources within the building and student absenteeism, there could be a connection between the two variables that would call for further research. Seven of the participants in the teacher survey also suggested curriculum changes for reducing student truancy through increased engagement. The number of students and teachers suggesting the addition of fine and practical arts courses leads the researcher to believe that some form of validation exists.

Another way students connect to their school is through extra-curricular activities. Typically, athletics drive this arena in the middle school setting. The vast majority of the middle school students are not participants in the school's athletic program. Clubs, organizations, and after-school programs are spaces where many students connect. Over the years, the number of these programs has been reduced due to lack of sponsorship, funding, and interest. Funding of extra-curricular activities has been cut, and these groups rely primarily on fundraising activities and a volunteer sponsor. Many teachers have pulled away from sponsoring activities due to low morale and minimal stipends for extra-curricular involvement.

Table 2. School Attendance Rates Over Time.

School Year	Overall Attendance Rates
2015-16	87.99%
2014-15	87.46%
2013-14	87.41%
2012-13	90.82%
2011-12	91.53%

As indicated in Table 2, overall student attendance has dropped. In 2013-14, the number of physical education and extra-curricular activities was reduced. In 2014-15, art and music classes were removed from the curriculum. In 2015-16, the librarian was reduced to part-time position while teaching a writing elective. While further studies are needed to establish a direct correlation between programming cuts and student attendance, it does lead the researcher to believe there is some type of relationship.

4.3.2 Teacher data

The evidence collected from school personnel support the hypothesis that they do not believe they can impact student attendance. Figure 3 shows that only two teachers feel they have a great influence on student attendance, while 11 respondents believe they have some influence and the remaining five believing they have no influence at all.

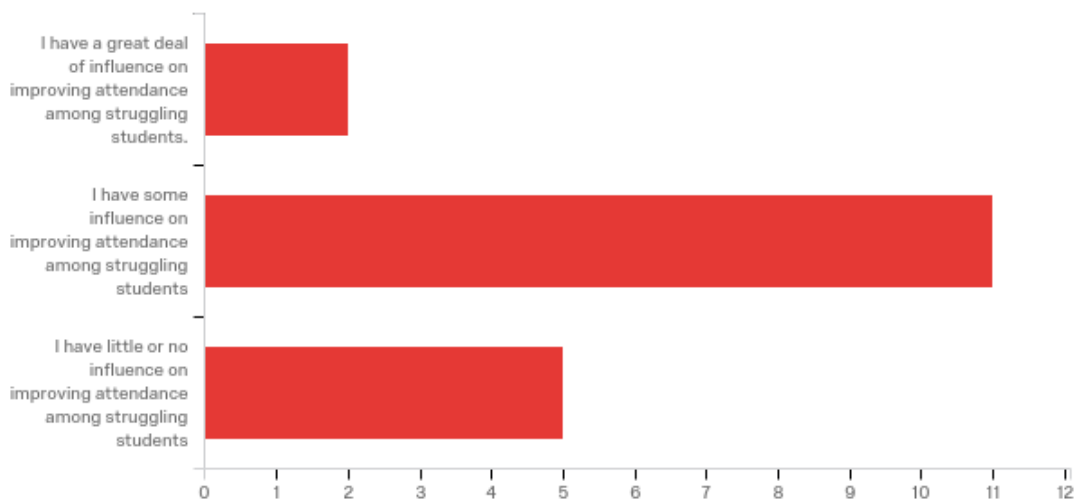


Figure 4. Teacher responses to level of influence towards student attendance.

If teachers have significant time with children, then the assumption would be that they would also have a significant amount of influence. While most of the teachers may not believe

they have great influence on their students, they do feel some responsibility for promoting student attendance. Over half of the respondents feel that it is their responsibility, while slightly fewer feel they play some role. (See Figure 5: Teacher Responses Towards Responsibility of Promoting Student Attendance.) The variability of teacher responses leads to questioning the location of these teachers. Are those who share the views about no responsibility within close proximity of each other in the school building, creating a critical mass? How do teachers' perceptions affect the students who cross paths with them?

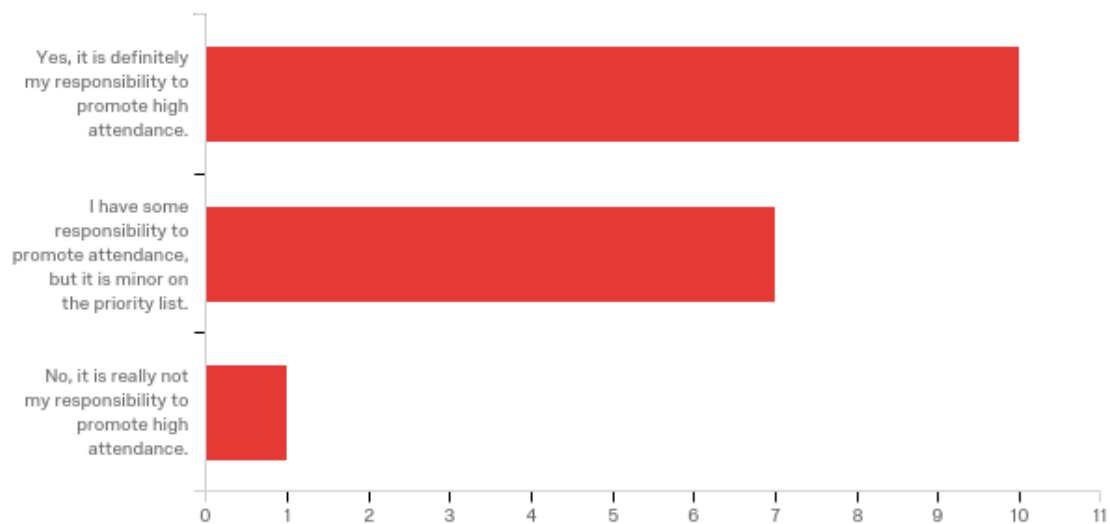


Figure 5. Teacher responses towards responsibility of promoting student attendance.

Three of the four teachers interviewed made attempts to encourage student attendance. Efforts include calling home when the students were absent, sending notes home, encouraging the students to come to school, and reminding them of the consequences if they were absent. It is apparent the teachers try to show they care, but oftentimes the students continue to be absent and subsequently truant. Many of the teachers stopped calling home. Some common reasons include parents not answering or the phone being disconnected. One of the teachers cited an instance when the parent was “high on drugs” and stated that the phone call was “killing [their] buzz.” Two of the four teachers report feeling powerless to combat truancy and, as a result, feel their

influence is meaningless. Some stated they “don’t try to engage the students since it doesn’t seem to work.” Another teacher stated, “When those students who are routinely absent actually start attending school, they disrupt the class, they don’t participate in the activities. They do not want to be there even when they are.” The same teacher continued, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink even if you shove their head in it for hours.”

Teachers were asked the same question as the students about absenteeism in general: What are the top three reasons students are absent from school? The teachers’ perceptions varied from the students with reasons including school phobia, bullying, homework, and poor relationships with teachers, all of which were not indicated in the student responses and can be found in Figure 6 below. These responses illustrate the multiple push and pull factors that exist in students’ lives.

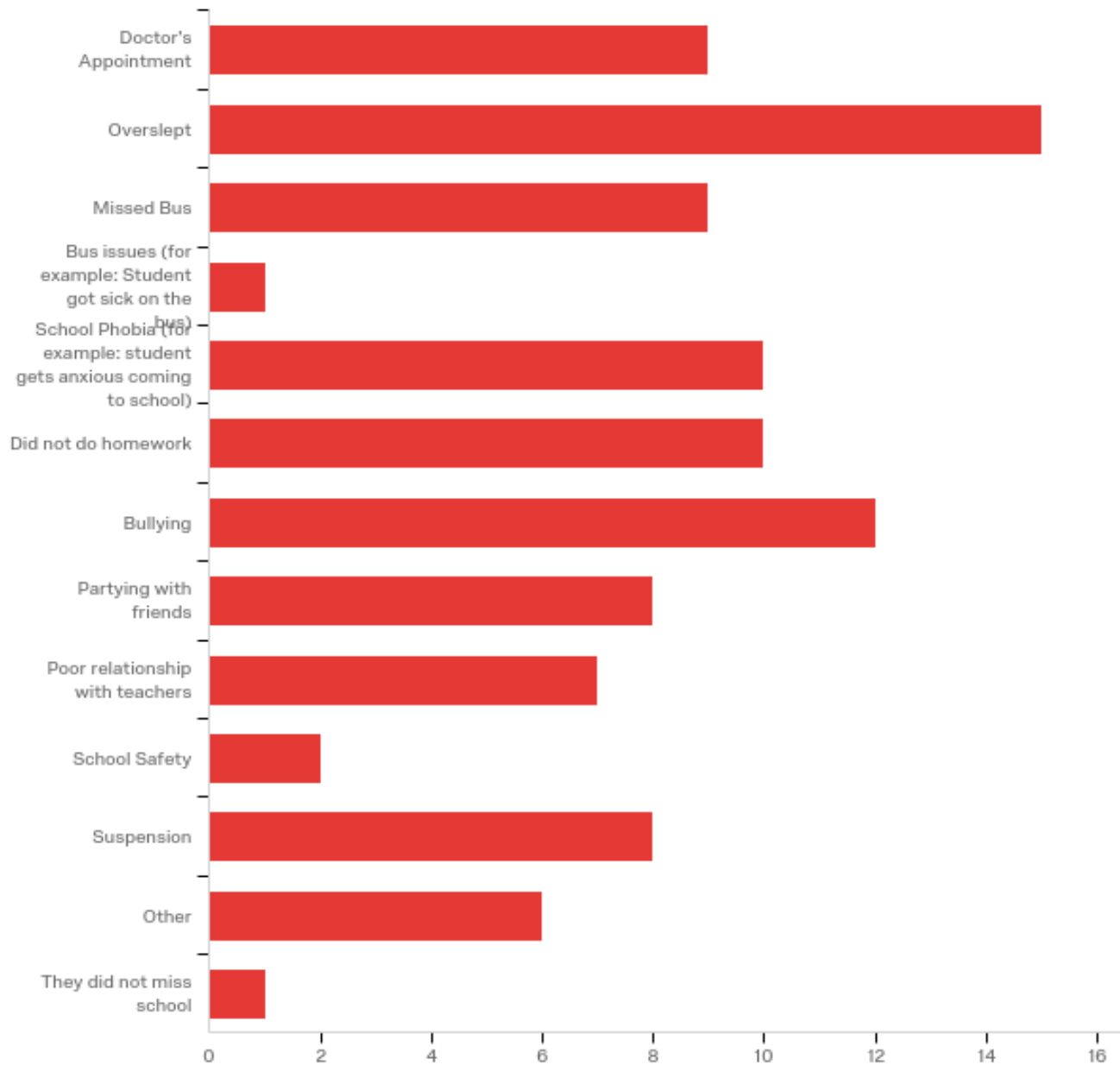


Figure 6. Teacher perceptions of student absences.

One of the teachers said that she believed the students “were too busy living their lives to come to school and get an education. The parents don’t help the students be kids and come to school. They blame the school for why the students don’t attend.” The special education teacher who was interviewed was very positive. He argued, “We need to remind them why it is important for them to be in school. We want them here. They need to know we care about them

and we will protect them so they can do great things. I try to form a relationship with all my students like that so they know I'm here for them, but they also need to do the work when they're here. I won't accept them taking up space and not learning."

In the survey, teachers were asked what can be done to improve student attendance in the school. Of the 18 participants, eight stated that positive programs for student engagement and rewards programs would be beneficial, and four cited a need for more elective courses such as art and music to provide a creative outlet.

The teachers' responses are very similar to the students regarding the open-ended question of what the school can do to improve student attendance. Both groups believe that positive efforts will "push" students to school more often.

4.4 FINDING 3: SHORTAGE OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

In discussing student attendance with all of the participants (students, parents, and school personnel), it is clear that some of the root causes of excessive absenteeism stem from issues in the home. The evidence to support this finding was combined from the student surveys as well as the interviews with parents, students, and school personnel. There are barriers that prevent students from attending, and it is possible that if these barriers are not present, attendance rates may be higher. This is noted in the student surveys in which nearly half (47 percent) said that it is difficult for them to attend school due to a family situation, as opposed to the cause of avoidance coming from the school (as evidenced in Figure 3 in section 4.3.1).

Throughout the research process, a common theme emerges from those families whose root cause of absenteeism were in the home setting. They need help, but they either do not know

where to go to access resources or the resources are not available to them. Johnson County is known as one of the most disadvantaged counties across the state; the need is great, but the county lacks fundamental resources to accommodate and support its residents. Community agencies lack personnel or funding to provide services. One example is Jane's mother, a girl who will be discussed in a later section. She was in need of mental health services that included wraparound therapeutic services and, potentially, family-based therapy services. The family contacted the county mental health office to engage in the services but was put on a waiting list.

With the number of families needing mental health services and the community not able to provide them, the students are going without the necessary resources. This situation follows them into the school setting. The school district currently has close relationships with Johnson County Drug and Alcohol Commission as they provide a SAP (student assistance program) liaison to the district, Connect a Classroom, and United Way for Kindergarten transition and the Intermediate Unit, to name a few.

According to the guidance counselor, one of the programs that has been the most beneficial for the school district is called Connect a Classroom, a county-sponsored truancy elimination program. Connect a Classroom is a new community organization within Johnson County. It operated a pilot program at the second half of the 2015-2016 school year and was fully implemented in the current 2016-2017 school year. The program replaces the former Communities in Schools of Southwestern Pennsylvania. Its mission is "to build partnerships among organizations, businesses, school districts, students, families and community members to inspire local students and provide them with the resources they need to succeed in school" (Connect a Classroom, 2016). It is funded by the Johnson County Children and Youth Services (CYS). A referral is made by the school district to the program. From there, a licensed

professional counselor (LPC) meets with the referring party to gain an understanding of what led to the referral. They will conduct an initial meeting with the family to understand what is happening to cause the student to be unlawfully absent. The counselor then conducts bi-weekly visits at the home to provide support; the counselor also visits the student at school. The goal of the program is to provide a transfer of skills to the family and student so that the student maintains school attendance after the service ceases.

While this is the first school year for implementation, the pilot study last year included nine students from the middle school. Of those nine students, 78 percent realized an increase in attendance, with the average rate of increase 10 percent. The counselor was able to connect families to services that were needed, such as mental health services, housing, public transportation, food banks, non-mental health medical services, and the Department of Public Welfare.

All of the students in the case study who will be discussed in detail were referred to Connect a Classroom. It has been the most beneficial for Daniel, a student who currently resides with another family member while his father is incarcerated. He missed 71 school days in 2015-2016. For 2016-2017, he only missed a half day up through Thanksgiving. Daniel is one of the many students who sees a licensed professional counselor on a bi-weekly basis through Connect a Classroom, which enables him to overcome his truancy challenges. His guardian stated, "Having the additional person, who was trained in our needs, to help us through a rough time was the key to keeping Daniel in school." The guidance counselor asserted, "Without Connect a Classroom, we would have no resources to help support our students. It's those students who experience stressors in the home and need help that benefit most."

The school employs a guidance counselor and a home school visitor who, as mentioned before, is the district's social worker. There exists a lack of personnel as well as a lack of time in the school day to provide the services. The special education teacher expressed the need for school-based mental health: "Mental health is getting in the way of the students' education. If they were able to receive the necessary services in school, you'd see a reduction in both truancy and behaviors that would lead to overall increased academic achievement and growth." He added, "We all wear many hats and utilize triage when determining where to provide support. Unfortunately, this is same at the local agencies and some families, some students, do not get served. When we are asked to do more with less, this is the result."

Finding time to provide for mental health in the school day is an obstacle. Unfortunately, time is a commodity that cannot be bought. Students' schedules are academically driven and do not allow for "free time" in the middle school. Again, the students expressed a need for some down time, but this would result in a reduction of academic time. The guidance counselor had mentioned that the middle school operates a tight academic schedule in order to maximize instructional time. "Test scores tend to take a priority and the belief, here, is the way to raise them is to increase academics." Delivering mental health services to students in need would also affect time spent on academics. However, the question remains: Without the services, how much learning is actually taking place? The answer would be minimal, especially if the students are missing school due to lack of mental health services in the school or community. "These are barriers to the students' learning. Remove the barriers and increase the learning. If we were able to address them initially, the students might have a chance", according to the guidance counselor.

The school district also has a number of homeless students. In 2015-2016, Johnson County had 303 homeless students, with Smith Area School District claiming 49 of them. This

population requires a liaison in the school district who can ensure the least amount of interruption to their education. As mentioned earlier, this person wears many hats and is unable to devote the majority of his time to a single initiative. The surveys and interviews from school personnel indicate that they believe there should be a dedicated home school visitor, and separate from the social worker, who also works as the homeless liaison. Nine of the participants for the teacher survey asserted that there should be a home school visitor who can focus solely on reducing student truancy for those students whose root causes generate from the home setting.

The social worker is currently also the homeless liaison. He identified this as a needy group because they require additional services. They lack a fixed nighttime residence. They stay with friends and relatives and, at times, never stay at the same place two nights in a row. Getting the students to school becomes a challenge for the district, as they do not know where to send the bus or van to pick them up. However, that is only if the students are concerned with coming to school. They have other priorities that must be met before education, such as basic survival needs like food, clothing, and a place to rest their heads at night. Connecting them with the right resources can assist in providing for these necessities so that the students can focus on their education. Unfortunately, the community has such a high need that there are not enough resources to meet the need, leaving students and their families on waiting lists or denied services altogether. During one interview, a teacher mentioned that she has two students that she knows of who are considered homeless because the house they were living in did not have electricity or running water so had to leave. The students stay with the great-aunt one night, a family friend the next, and some nights in their car. The mother is afraid that Children and Youth Services will remove the students from her custody, so they stay on the move until she can make enough

money for a permanent residence. Consequently, the students are absent from school at least twice per week.

According to the social worker, many students in these situations come from single-parent or grandparent homes with multiple children. As a result, they are in a single-income setting that is expected to support an entire family, where some form of government assistance is needed. The social worker explained that there are cases where the only income is government assistance. These situations describe all of the families interviewed, who rely on government assistance. Without school or community resources, children in the middle school are forced to focus on basic needs as opposed to learning, a casualty of economically disadvantaged demographics.

4.5 FINDING 4: DISORDER AND TRAUMA IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Each participant, including students and parents, along the way has a story to tell, one that is theirs and theirs alone. Each has a different set of circumstance, consequences, and specifics. However, a consistent theme emerged throughout. Circumstances in the home environment translated into root causes increasing the risk of student truancy. Four middle school students and their parents were interviewed to gain an understanding of environmental factors and individual situations for students who are habitually truant. The names have been changed to protect confidentiality of the participants.

The first family is Jane Smith and her mother. Jane is fifteen years old and in eighth grade for the second time. She is considered economically disadvantaged and identifies as a special education student with a primary disability of emotional disturbance. She lives with her

mother, stepfather, two older brothers who are still in high school, and the oldest brother's baby, who just turned one. Jane does not attend the regular middle school. Due to her emotional needs and her need for a least restrictive environment, Jane attends a full-time emotional support classroom in a school operated by the local intermediate unit located within the school district's borders. She has been there since the start of her middle school years in sixth grade, so this is her fourth year. During the 2015-2016 school year, she attended only 95 school days out of 180. All of her absences were considered unexcused, leaving her with an attendance rate of 46 percent. As of the Thanksgiving holiday in November, Jane had attended only 14 school days for the 2016-2017 school year.

Many interventions have been attempted over the last year and one-half to improve Jane's attendance. The school district filed multiple truancy citations against Jane's mother, who had to appear before the local magistrate several times. Numerous fines and court costs were issued. The magistrate would even threaten Jane with the possibility of Children Youth Services intervention or Juvenile Probation, but Jane's truancy did not decrease. A new principal began at the start of the 2016-2017 school year and has had three meetings to date with Jane and her mother. The outcomes are all the same: Jane's attendance does not improve. At the last meeting right before Thanksgiving 2016, the principal agreed to promote Jane to ninth grade to be with her peers – if she would attend school regularly. Jane's mother agreed to bring her to school and ensure her attendance. Jane agreed to attend if she would move up to the ninth grade. Since that meeting, Jane has attended only one day of school.

The school district employed their home school visitor to make weekly visits to the home from September 2016 through November 2016. Most of the time, no one answers the door. On one rare occasion when someone did come to the door, it was the oldest brother's girlfriend who

did not know where anyone else was. At that visit, the home school visitor had reason to believe they were using drugs in the home due to a marijuana-like smell that emanated from the front door. A referral to Children Youth Services was made. To the home school visitor's knowledge, no contact has yet been made by the agency.

When meeting with Jane, she appeared agitated at the thought that she was supposed to attend school regularly. She did not like her classes because she was with students who were up to two years younger than she. Due to her absences, she struggles with academics. Her self-esteem is poor because, in her words, she "felt dumb." Even though she was promoted to ninth grade to be with peers her own age, Jane lacks the education to hold her own among them and not feel "dumb." Jane also has conflicts with another student in the school. She states that she would get into a fight if she saw the girl in school and, to avoid the fine that would follow from that type of behavior, she would rather avoid school.

When asked if she thought school was important, Jane would not give a definitive answer; nor would she when asked if the school could do anything to help her attend regularly. Jane often sleeps throughout the day. She stays up late because she has no intention of going to school. When questioned on her future plans, Jane shrugs her shoulders and looks to the wall. She has recently taken up smoking cigarettes and has developed an interest in older boys.

Jane's mother says she does not know what to do to get her daughter to school. She feels that she has no control over her. She believes that, as a parent, she has done as much as she can to get Jane to school. According to her mother, Jane has been sneaking out of the house at night to hang out with older "boys of the opposite race." She has already taken Jane's cell phone so she cannot communicate for lengths of time. Now, Jane's mother also locks her cell phone away each night so that Jane cannot access her social media. The Internet modem is also located in her

mother's bedroom, where it is turned off each night at nine. The doors and windows are armed with chimes so that no one can enter or exit without notice.

Jane's mother appreciates the efforts made on behalf of the school and the school district to assist in getting Jane to attend school regularly. When asked if she would accept a Connect a Classroom referral to enact the agency to also assist in the efforts, Jane's mother reluctantly agrees. Her hesitation comes on the heels of the funding source of Connect a Classroom. While not facilitating the program directly, Children Youth Services provides the funding for Connect a Classroom to operate their truancy elimination program. Jane's mother was adamant that CYS could not be involved. Both the mother and Jane exhibited an excessive amount of fear that CYS would take Jane out of the home. When asked about the reasons behind this fear, Jane's mother became less communicative. She followed up with the acceptance of the Connect a Classroom referral and a "thank you for your time."

Jacob's story is different. Jacob is a thirteen-year-old seventh grader with average grades. His attendance during the previous school year (2015-2016) is very poor but not as bad as Jane's. Jacob missed 49 school days last year for an attendance rate of 64 percent. He improved this year but is still considered truant. From the start of the year through Thanksgiving, he has missed 14 school days with an attendance rate of 77 percent.

During the 2015-2016 school year, when Jacob was in sixth grade, he was in the middle of a custody battle. Jacob would spend the weekdays with his mother, who resided within the school district, but then spend the weekends at his father's home in the neighboring school district. Jacob would often give his mother a difficult time at home; therefore, his father offered to take him for some time and to flip the custody arrangements. There was no discussion of making changes to Jacob's schooling. Things changed when Jacob's mother went to pick him up

from school one day and realized he was not there because he was no longer enrolled in the school district. Jacob's father enrolled him in the neighboring school district but was not requiring Jacob to attend. The court system got involved, and a court order was issued requiring Jacob to return to his mother's custody and thus enroll back in his former school. In an interview, Jacob's mother shared that Jacob's father had suffered life-threatening injuries and severe brain trauma as a result of a car accident a few years ago. This impaired his decision-making skills. Jacob's father now has supervised visits with Jacob and his younger brother.

While custody of Jacob was the main issue for his failure to attend school, other factors that have caused Jacob's absences. Jacob refused to attend school last year due to his increased anxiety. When asked by adults, he refused to open up and explain why he did not want to go to school. Only when the Chief of the School Police made a home visit that Jacob came clean. The Chief has a strong relationship with the student body, which allows him to be someone they trust. Jacob told the Chief that another male student made sexual advances towards him in the bathroom. He did not know the perpetrator and feared he would see him again in the hallways and cafeteria. This situation was brought to the school administration's attention, but they had a difficult time completing an investigation due to inconsistencies in Jacob's description of the events. According to Jacob's mother, he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and school anxiety as a result of the incident. He now sees a psychiatrist to assist in developing coping skills.

Jacob's mother also reports that Jacob misses school as a result of her mother, Jacob's grandmother. She is suffering from a debilitating illness that has become terminal. Both of her sons are close with their grandmother and choose to spend as much time as possible with her, even during school time. Jacob's mother knows this is not the best course of action for her sons'

education, but she does not want to deny them time with her. Additionally, Jacob has a weakened immune system and is absent from school often due to illnesses. He does not always see a doctor, due to the cost of copays, so the days missed become unexcused days. Jacob's family, including the grandmother, resides in a neighborhood that sits below a coal fly ash impoundment. Coal ash is a by-product from coal combustion and contains arsenic, mercury, lead, and other carcinogenic materials. Due to the downshift of winds through the years, fly ash blows onto the neighborhood below and covers everything exposed. The residents in the neighborhood have reported high rates of cancer, asthma, and other respiratory illnesses.

However, the 2016-2017 school year has been a positive one for Jacob. He has been attending school regularly. His only absences this year are a result of asthma complications. The guidance counselor referred him to Connect a Classroom where he works with a social worker regularly. According to Jacob's mother, he is utilizing his coping skills well and seeks out the guidance counselor when he needs an outlet. Jacob also reports that he feels safe and protected at school. The family has made education a priority, so they plan family time with the grandmother in the evenings and weekends.

Identifying the interventions that were effective in promoting school attendance for Jacob proved to be difficult, given the number of problems presented at both the home and school level. Jacob's mother credits the Chief of School Police and guidance counselor with assisting Jacob. Between the Connect a Classroom intervention and his regular appointments with his psychiatrist, Jacob has the skillset needed to focus on his education, removing the barriers that prevented his regular attendance. His asthma is still an issue, but the family is working on it. Jacob's mother reports that she remembers once or twice when the school had called to check on Jacob. She is unsure as to who made that contact, whether it was a teacher, guidance counselor,

or other personnel. Truancy warning letters were sent home. Given Jacob's circumstances, she does not believe there was anything more the school could have done to help him attend. The personal issues were too great to overcome.

Jacob concurs with his mother on the assessment of school outreach; however, he would like to see some free time in the school day for his friends. He believes the day is too structured and the expectation of constant work is too great. He states, "We go from the elementary school with recess, homeroom parties, and walking with our class from teacher to teacher to the middle school where we move at the sound of a bell on our own with no free time or parties except for lunch. Even then, we are told what to do, where to sit, etc." Jacob shares similar thoughts to his peers as evidenced by the student surveys. Jacob and his peers believe that twenty minutes of "free time" for socialization and friends would be motivating and help improve student attendance, as students would want to come to school more. "It would be fun then."

Of the students interviewed, Daniel has the worst attendance rates. His attendance during the 2015-2016 school year was inconsistent at best. Daniel was absent 71 days that year with all but a handful marked as unexcused. He is a newly promoted seventh grader. Daniel had failed sixth grade due to lack of attendance and refusal to complete school work. He completed coursework through the Keystone Credit Recovery program in order to be promoted.

Not only did Daniel have to face the difficult transition of leaving the nurturing atmosphere of elementary school and embarking on middle school, but he also had to learn to cope without his father. Prior to sixth grade, Daniel resided with his father in his grandmother's home. His mother was not present in his life. The school is unsure about the reason for her absence, her whereabouts, or if she is even still alive. At the start of the school year, Daniel was uprooted to live with his aunt, his father's sister. She was granted temporary guardianship

because Daniel's father had to report to prison to serve an eighteen to twenty-four month sentence for involuntary manslaughter as a result of driving under the influence. Under the aunt's roof, Daniel has had to adjust to rules that he never had to follow before, such as chores and completing his homework before being allowed to play video games. This has been quite an adjustment for Daniel and he became oppositional defiant with the aunt, which translated to the school setting.

When Daniel was in attendance at school during the 2015-2016 school year, he would lash out at teachers and refuse to complete his work. As a result, he was referred to the social worker and guidance counselor with whom he also refused to engage. The aunt grew concerned and requested testing for special education services. Daniel did not qualify for these services as he did not exhibit an educational need. As a result of his absences, Daniel fell behind in his academics, making it difficult to keep up, thus pushing him farther away from school.

At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, Daniel was referred to both the BEST and Connect a Classroom programs. BEST is an academic support program for students who do not qualify for special education but require additional accommodations beyond a regular education environment. These accommodations include time with the social worker or guidance counselor, extra time to complete assignments, testing in a separate room, limited choices on tests, and related accommodations. Sometimes students need just a little extra support to help them succeed when they are not eligible for services. That is what the BEST program provides. It takes the Student Assistance Program to a new level by providing a team approach to interventions. A Connect a Classroom caseworker was assigned to Daniel. She sees him at school weekly and also makes bi-weekly home visits to assist the family with resources outside of the school

setting. As a result of the added supports, Daniel's attendance has drastically improved. He has missed only a half-day of school as of Thanksgiving.

Daniel's residence and guardianship will change hands once again in the spring of 2017 when his father is released from prison. The plan is for Daniel to return to his grandmother's home with his father. Transition planning has been in the works to avoid regression on Daniel's part. His aunt will continue to be involved in his life to assist in the shift. His father and grandmother will partake in planning meetings once his father has gotten back on his feet and a stable environment is viable for Daniel. It is hoped that with continued supports and transition planning, Daniel will continue to find the success he has been experiencing this school year.

Daphne has a slightly different story from the others. She has not missed a sizable number of school days. For the 2015-2016 school year, Daphne missed 13 days, all of which were unexcused, resulting in an attendance rate of 85 percent. For the first half of 2016-2017, she missed 18 unexcused days with an attendance rate of 83 percent. Daphne is rapidly declining at this rate. She has missed 29 days so far. The extra 11 days are a result of out-of-school suspensions. Daphne is a conduct disorder concern where her continuous disruptive behavior affects her education, causing her to repeat eighth grade as a result of failing academics from the previous year.

During the 2015-2016 school year, Daphne lived at home with her mother, younger brother, niece, and a family friend who is in high school and considered homeless. Her mother does not work, and their income comes from government assistance. Daphne has five brothers and sisters, none of whom share the same father. She spends her summers in Brooklyn, where the family originates. At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, Daphne and her family were evicted. They have been staying with a family friend while her mother secures another residence

for them. Due to the circumstances, her family was deemed homeless for the remainder of the school year. Daphne's mother has been working with the school district's homeless liaison/social worker to find a place to live and resources for support.

At the time of the interview, the family was in the closing process of a new home purchase in the neighboring school district. Since Daphne and her brother were deemed homeless, they have the option of staying in the school district for the remainder of the year or transferring to the new one, according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act (2016). The family intended to keep the brother in the district and transfer Daphne to the new school because of her behavior and lack of academic success.

When talking with Daphne about her truancy issues, she was very forthcoming with her reasons. She simply does not like school. Daphne believed the teachers target her and only her, and her behavior is not an issue in Daphne's eyes. Daphne only comes to school to see her friends and to get away from her family. According to Daphne, she would attend more "if the adults would leave her alone" and the school would eliminate "the stupid rules." When pressed for clarification, Daphne insisted that she should be able to do what she wants when she wants. She stated she has no rules at home, so it makes sense to her that she should also not have to follow rules at school.

Daphne's mother shares similar sentiments in the interview. She had behavior issues with Daphne at home and had to make multiple trips to the school to address her behavior there as well. She stated, "She don't listen but those teachers need to lay off." She believes that her daughter's unlawful absences are a direct reflection of the alleged "harassment" endured from the teachers. Her mother added that she is tired of making frequent trips to the school, as it is an inconvenience.

She said she wishes that Daphne did not cause as much trouble as she does because it affects Daphne's mother's day. She also feels that Daphne's academics are lacking due to her number of suspensions. She questions why the school would suspend her when that is exactly what Daphne wants. Daphne's mother believes the suspensions reinforce the bad behavior. When Daphne is suspended, her mother reports that she is not at home during the school day but out in the neighborhood with friends who are not in school; there is no consequence at home for her suspension. When questioned about the school's efforts to improve attendance, she offers no suggestion except to stop suspending her daughter and work on the teachers' attitudes since they are the reason behind Daphne's behavior at school.

Daphne's case is different from the previous three. Even though there are several factors in the home setting that contributed to her absenteeism, her mother chose to blame the school for her daughter's behavior and absences. Her mother skirted any questions that related to Daphne's home situation, including their temporary lack of housing. Both Daphne and her mother only addressed questions or statements about the school. Both avoided discussing anything about their own behaviors that would suggest a deeper response is necessary or beneficial.

While the circumstances of the families are different, common themes emerged through the research process. With the amount of trauma and disruption students faced, they lacked supportive home environments that yield the structure necessary for consistent school attendance. As the literature reinforces, students who do not have supportive home environments and have considerable needs are considered at-risk for truancy. This is evident in the four families in this case study. For these students, the school has played a role of primary support by connecting families to the resources they need or, in the case of Daphne, the school has been a

target of blame for the student's truancy. The role played by the school depends on the relationship the family has with it.

It is important to note that the four students and their families have significant extenuating circumstances. This is not the case for all truant students within the school district or in middle school. As noted in the survey findings, students miss school for various reasons (as indicated in Figure 3). Those students were not interviewed in this study. The root causes of the students' unlawful absences vary, but the consequence remains the same. Poor attendance led to poor academic achievement, which resulted in failing grade levels or similar situations.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 OVERVIEW

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the context in which truancy occurs in an economically disadvantaged middle school in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The study built upon the hypothesis that students in an economically disadvantaged middle school are truant as a result of a complex process in which students disengage from school, often without understanding the full consequences of this disengagement. The tools utilized in this study included a combination of surveys and interviews with school personnel, students, and parents as well as relevant artifact and document collection from the school, state, and federal levels. Surveys were used to gain an understanding of the school culture in the setting where the study was conducted. The interviews with the parents and students allowed for a deeper development of individual thoughts and feelings, as well as a chance for the participants to tell their stories.

Upon conclusion of the study, four findings emerged: a disconnect among school, state, and federal policies and procedures is apparent; disengagement of students from the school community is prominent; school and community resources are minimal; and a supportive home environment for some students is marginal. As discussed previously, any one of these factors alone presents a challenge for addressing student absenteeism in the school system, but when all four work in tandem, the environment is in substantial need of change.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SMITH AREA

The results of the study have prompted several recommendations for practice specific to Smith Area School District, and one for future research. While I present these recommendations for the study district in particular, similar recommendations might be useful in economically disadvantaged districts throughout the state and nation. In Chapter 6 I return to implications for practice by presenting more general recommendations for addressing truancy in socio-economically disadvantaged districts.

The school district in this case should take a hard look at their own attendance policies and procedures and compare them to the requirements set forth at both the state and federal levels. As ESSA is in flux at this time, it would be best to focus on Act 138 of 2016, which was enacted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as well as the Basic Education Circular on student attendance and truancy and compare it to the current school district policy. A revision of the district's policy is needed to bring consistency with the state level. A meeting with the local magistrate and school district administration would help both parties to develop mutual expectations and understandings.

Another issue to be addressed is the creation of a school attendance improvement team. Who will participate on the team? What will the format of student conferences look like? As discussed earlier, the district currently operates a student assistance program in each school building in addition to a BEST team. Members of each BEST team, which includes the building principal, guidance counselor, school psychologist, and a teacher or two, could also function as the school attendance improvement team. Often, students in SAP or BEST have attendance issues in addition to other reasons for their referrals. Having the same team in place would allow

for seamless transitions across programs as the people involved are already aware of the students referred.

It is apparent that the school district's social worker wears many hats and does not have enough time for each of his duties, particularly when it comes to performing the role of the home school visitor. With a guidance counselor in each of the district's three school buildings, these personnel are more connected to the students and are able to utilize the relationships they have already built. Therefore, it is recommended that the school district explore utilizing the guidance counselors as additional home school visitors, with the support of the school resource officer, to get out to the homes of truant students. While there may be challenges regarding guidance counselors' workloads, it is advisable to consider the feasibility of such an option. The home school visitor is a certified position in Pennsylvania. Only those guidance counselors who hold certification would be eligible to assist. In order to obtain the home school visitor certification, one must be a licensed social worker. Two additional employees in the school district are indeed licensed social workers and capable of holding a home school visitor certification. They would, however, still need to apply for certification to assist the current home school visitor.

The other option would be for the guidance counselors to take on some of the counseling services the social worker provides, as long as the work they take over is counseling. As social workers and guidance counselors are certified positions, a guidance counselor cannot offer social work services that only a licensed social worker is able to provide. The school would need to be mindful of this situation.

Additionally, the school district's guidance counselors should reach out to community agencies to advocate for families in need of resources. When the school is the only resource families know, they may not be aware of all the programs that are available to them or how to

access them efficiently. Likewise, agencies could reach out to schools to notify them of available programs in the event that the school has a family who would benefit from the services.

Given the lack of student engagement cited by some teachers, it would be beneficial to focus on elements that invite students to engage in the school community. Such interventions can include check and connect (where students check in with a selected teacher or mentor on a regular weekly basis), student-teacher mentoring, and positive rewards systems that promote good student attendance and behavior. From the data collected in this study, it is difficult to tell how school culture may contribute to attendance and truancy problems, but the items listed above can positively affect the school culture and boost attendance. The school administration, in conjunction with the school personnel, should explore the push and pull factors of the building with the staff, students, and school community. They should seek out resources that could assist in this process to support buy-in and sustainability from stakeholders. A good place to start would be a school-wide positive behavior program that encourages good behavior by providing the students with positive reinforcements instead of negative consequences. The interventions listed above are components of school-wide positive behavior intervention and support programs. The local intermediate unit would be an excellent resource to consult for a program of this nature.

Finally, further research and evaluation on new and existing programs is recommended. Connect a Classroom is a new program to Johnson County, founded by Children Youth Services. It was mentioned in almost all of the student and parent interviews. The previous school year, 2015-2016, was a pilot year for the program, with only 10 district students enrolled. The 2016-2017 current school year is the first year for full implementation, so a study on the effectiveness of the program would be beneficial. In addition to recommendations for improvement to the

program in its current operation, the question of replication in other counties or across the state could be addressed.

As a research practitioner, this study influenced my own practice. It served as a reminder that while our students' roles are to be that, students, they encounter tough, adult-like issues in their home lives, which can pull them away from the school and not by their own choosing. The adults in the school need to find ways to bring them into school daily and support their needs. In times of budget restraints, increasing regulations, and pressure to raise test scores, educational professionals can lose sight of the stressors children face. This study reminded me that if we are not focused on supporting our students, then what are we here for?

5.3 LIMITATIONS

As with all research studies, there are limitations that may have impacted the findings. For this study in particular, three limitations have been identified. First, my position as a school administrator in the setting where the study took place could have influenced the responses in the interviews. Even though I affirmed from the beginning that the participants' responses should be as honest as possible and that there would not be any negative consequences, the participants may not have been as forthcoming as they would with an outsider. From what I could gauge given the body language and the candidness of the interviews, I believe this limitation to have had minimal impact on the findings.

The second limitation is the low sample size from school personnel surveys. The total population of teachers was small and the number of respondents was only slightly more than half. The original plan was to administer the survey at a staff meeting, to promote a high

response rate. Unfortunately, there were no staff meetings scheduled during the data collection time frame, and it was necessary to email the survey to teachers. A weekly reminder was sent each week for four weeks. In the end, a 50% response rate was lower than hoped for, but not unusually low for an internet-based survey. While the results are likely affected by both sampling error and non-response bias, I do believe the results revealed the basic tendencies, and substantial variability, in the causes of truancy at Smith Area Middle School.

The third limitation was access to students and parents participating in the interview portion of the study. Locating parents to gain permission to interview children proved to be difficult. Phones were disconnected, or parents would not answer their phones. I had hoped to use truancy hearings as an initial point of contact, but many parents did not even attend their own court hearings. This situation led to a smaller than intended participant pool. However, this was a “blessing in disguise” since the quality and quantity of responses from the four participant families in the end provided rich evidence of the home challenges facing truant students and the nature of their orientation towards school. As a secondary limitation specific to the four case studies presented here, the reader should be mindful that not every student who is truant experiences such difficult dilemmas. These were four cases of 400+ students in the middle school; most students probably have less detrimental reasons for not attending school regularly. One could speculate that they have a routine of sleeping in without a ride to school, want to avoid an assignment or test, or just did not feel like attending. These more routine sources of poor attendance exist and need to be addressed as well.

5.4 CONCLUSION

In section 5.2, I put forth a set of recommendations for Smith Area Middle School, and in Chapter 6 I provide a more extensive discussion of policies and practices to promote attendance in Pennsylvania and beyond. Yet, importantly, the results of this study show that implementing any given recommendation in isolation will not substantially promote positive student attendance. Policy, the home environment, and school and community resources that promote engagement and address challenges in the home, function interactively to affect truancy. The next chapter provides further detail concerning implications for practice to improve attendance, reducing unlawful absences.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Several general recommendations for district practices derive from the findings. The following detailed recommendations were disseminated to Smith Area district officials at an administrator meeting that included building principals and the district superintendent. Suggestions were given to Smith Area for implementation in the following school year, but the recommendations hold for socio-economically disadvantaged school districts throughout PA and beyond.

6.1 RECOMMENDATION ONE: POLICY AND PROCEDURE

To keep school district policy aligned with state policies, I recommend that district attendance policies and procedures in Pennsylvania be revised to reflect the current Act 138 of 2016. School districts are to implement the regulation with the start of the 2017-2018 school year. A new Basic Education Circular on Student Attendance and Truancy will be released by the Pennsylvania Department of Education prior to the end of the 2016-2017 school year, and Act 138 of 2016 will be explained for school entities. It is important to note that cyber charter schools and other charter schools are not considered school entities, but they must have their own attendance policies in place. The requirement of notifying a student's school of residence about the student's attendance is still in effect with this legislation. It is the school district's

responsibility to carry out the truancy laws on behalf of the cyber charter schools and charter schools. This situation needs to be addressed in school districts' policies.

I also recommend that districts' attendance policies include pertinent information from Act 138 of 2016. For the first year of implementation, school districts' policies should mirror the regulations in the legislation. Specifically, districts should use the data from the first year and make a determination to revise the policy to exceed the regulations, which will show a tougher stance on unlawful absences. The district administration should meet after the first year to discuss and determine next steps. The regulations to be included in the policy begin with a warning after a student accrues three unexcused absences. This warning should outline the possible actions that the school district would take and the possibility of fines imposed by the local magistrate. The policy should also contain the warning that after a student has missed six days of unexcused absences, the parents and/or guardians, along with the student, would be required to meet with school officials to hold a "school attendance improvement conference" in which an individual plan of action would be developed. A template of the action plan is currently in development by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. If this plan of action is not successful and a student accrues additional unexcused absences, a citation may be filed with the local magistrate. The plan of action must be submitted with the citation in order for it to stand in court. The policy should also state that for students under the age of 15, only the parents and/or guardians would be cited. For students 15 and older, the student and parents and/or guardians would both be cited. Previously, students at age 12 and older were cited. Finally, it should also state that if a child's school attendance does not improve, Children Youth Services will be notified.

As a result of having to implement school attendance improvement conferences, it is advisable that each school within a district formulate a process and a team responsible for overseeing such processes. This could include the building principal, guidance counselor, social worker (if available), and one or two teachers to provide pertinent input to the team. Members of the SAP and BEST teams would be good participants; as truant students may become involved in one or both of the programs.

According to Act 138 of 2016, the policy revision and new procedures must be in place by the start of the 2017-2018 school year. School district staff will need training on the new procedures, and parents will need to be notified in advance at the start of the school year. An expectation from the Pennsylvania Department of Education is that the template for the action plans will be available for use at that time.

6.2 RECOMMENDATION TWO: PERSONNEL

Schools across the country are routinely forced to do more with less. For that reason, administrations are forced to be creative with personnel decisions, requiring teachers and others to carry out multiple professional roles at one time. The social worker is one example. To a lesser extent, administrators and guidance counselors are also faced with added duties beyond their traditional roles. It would be advisable for school districts to review the responsibilities each position holds in order to determine the feasibility of shifting responsibilities from social workers to guidance counselors in order to allow social workers to dedicate more time to the role of home school visitor. For example, currently, a social worker counsels students on a regular basis. One suggestion is that guidance counselors in each building take on an extra case or two to

provide counseling, which would free the social worker to make a few additional home visits. This option would be viable so long as it does not interfere with students with disabilities whose individual education plans (IEP) call for counseling and not social work. Therefore, counseling caseloads would need to be monitored carefully.

Additionally, school districts should reconsider the duties of the attendance clerk. Traditionally, the attendance clerk is to complete the required paperwork for truant students. If the attendance clerk had time in the day for additional reporting, they would be able to take on the monthly reporting required for homeless students, thus freeing the social worker to concentrate on student outreach in the home and community. The position of attendance clerk is a union position, and any adjustments made to the job description would need to be negotiated by the school district and union officials.

If the school district determines that these shifts in responsibilities are viable, the social worker could devote additional time as the home school visitor to reduce student truancy, which would be beneficial for all parties involved.

6.3 RECOMMENDATION THREE: PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

The school district in this study is not unlike many in Pennsylvania, it is located in an area with a significant unmet need for financial resources to fund supplemental services. As a result, some families are having great difficulty connecting with the school and community support organizations. Therefore, it is crucial that school personnel do a better job utilizing their professional connections to bring families to these organizations. It is recommended, then, that guidance counselors, in conjunction with the home school visitor, collaborate in order to reach

out to community organizations that provide services to families in need. These organizations include, but are not limited to, County Behavioral Health organizations, County Children Youth Services, and non-profit organizations with county office such as the United Way.

In addition, a running list of collaborative organizations should be posted in each guidance department with the agency names, contact person(s), and services available from those organizations. The list should be updated regularly, with the team reaching out to the organizations each semester to keep the lines of communication open between the two entities. Such consistent interaction would provide reference materials that guidance counselors and other staff could turn to in order to provide families with resources quickly and efficiently. The goal is to enable families and the school to develop a relationship by working together for the betterment of the students.

6.4 RECOMMENDATION FOUR: SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

Addressing student engagement through the culture of each school building is a significant hurdle; however, the reward makes the risk worth taking. In this study, it was not clear that school culture per se at Smith Area was to blame for poor attendance, but the recommended truancy interventions are likely to improve culture, which could only help improve attendance. School administrators should work with school personnel and stakeholders, including students, parents, and community members, to identify where systemic problems of engagement may exist, including elements of the school culture that push students away from school (e.g., bullying, academic and social anxiety, and boredom). Many schools are currently utilizing School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, to improve school

attendance culture. PBIS is a systemic approach that includes “proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments” (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2017). The approach is evidence-based and breaks supports into tiered levels to “improve lifestyle results” for all students. A few interventions previously discussed would improve attendance and are also part of PBIS. Both Check and Connect and student-teacher mentoring programs are designed to improve student-teacher relations and pull students toward school. These programs encourage student-teacher relationships built on trust, and give students a reason to connect with school. Additionally, a positive rewards program would provide students with the “unstructured, free time” that students discussed in the surveys.

The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) provides PBIS-trained consultants, generally in close proximity to schools, who can provide assistance and training for proper implementation of behavioral interventions. Technical assistance begins with an administrator overview, where the building principal, together with stakeholder groups (e.g., district and school personnel, students, parents, and community leaders) determine the details of program implementation. The incorporation of various stakeholder groups creates sustainability in the PBIS system, helping to create buy-in across the school community.

6.5 CONCLUSION

As an educational administrator in the school district where the study was conducted, it was imperative that I develop an understanding of the context under which truancy occurs and what can be done to reduce it. In a school where the majority of students are economically

disadvantaged, exposure to the curriculum is a priority. Simply put, students are not learning if they are absent from school.

From the study, four findings materialized. The review of documents showed (1) a policy disconnect between the school and government regulations. The surveys and interviews provided evidence that (2) student disengagement in the school and (3) minimal school and community resources exacerbated problems of attendance. Finding (4) emerged from interviews with truant students and their parents. Disorder and trauma at home constitute a root cause of truancy, forcing the student to concentrate on coping with instability in the home instead of academics. Disorder and trauma can become over-riding factors affecting school attendance, as was the case in the four families I interviewed, where students who were barely teenagers faced a barrage of adult issues with limited support.

From the findings, four recommendations for practice at Smith Area were identified. The recommendations relate to broad domains of intervention: Policy and procedure, personnel, professional networks, and school interventions, and thus, apply well beyond Smith Area. The first recommendation for practice was for Smith Area to revise their attendance policy and procedures to reflect the regulations from Act 138 of 2016. Many school districts are probably in a similar position, where enacted policy at the district level does not adequately reflect new state policies.

The second recommendation is to carefully consider the use of school personnel to promote attendance. As an example of the challenges under-resources districts face, Smith Area has difficult decisions to make about the composition of the school attendance conference team for each school building. Who are the members of the team? When do they meet? What does the framework look like? In this case, Smith Area middle might be able to utilize the guidance

counselors for counseling purposes to free the social worker to conduct more home visits as the home school visitor. However, if Smith Area is any indication, even the most creative use of school personnel might leave need unmet.

The third recommendation is to create capacity for supporting attendance by bolstering professional networks between schools/districts and county and community organizations. Guidance counselors are very important actors within a professional network of community resources, because the school is usually the first place parents contact when they are struggling. Arming the school with a list of available resources will help schools to connect families to the appropriate agencies.

The final recommendation for practice is for school administrators to utilize existing interventions supported by state agencies in Pennsylvania that are specifically designed to address systemic problems of student engagement. Of the available approaches, School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, known as PBIS, is recommended as it targets the push factors that drive students away from school. Relatedly, further research is needed to study the Connect a Classroom program that is currently implemented in Johnson County, Pennsylvania and elsewhere. It was mentioned in all of the interviews with the students and their parents. Further research is recommended to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as the possibility of reciprocity across other counties.

While educational professionals have many priorities, attention to truancy and attendance is moving to the forefront. The requirements of Act 138 of 2016 have forced school districts to take a proactive approach by addressing student attendance early, particularly with unexcused absences that lead students to the truancy officer. No learning environment is perfect, and some students face academic and social challenges at school that their instinct tells them to avoid. Yet,

when students are in school, they are exposed to the curriculum and able to seek out interventions to meet their academic needs, and better able to connect with the guidance counselors and social workers who can help address their academic and social and emotional needs.

APPENDIX A

DOCUMENT PROTOCOL

- **NAME OF DOCUMENT:** _____
- **TYPE OF DOCUMENT:** _____
- **OFFICIAL OR UNOFFICIAL:** _____
- **PUBLIC INFORMATION:** _____
- **DATE OF DOCUMENT AND REVISIONS:** _____
- **AUTHOR/TITLE/POSITION OF DOCUMENT:** _____
- **PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT:** _____

• **AUDIENCE OF DOCUMENT:** _____

• **SIGNIFICANCE OF DOCUMENT:** _____

• **FIVE OR LESS IMPORTANT FACTS FROM THE DOCUMENT:**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

APPENDIX B

SURVEYS

The following are the two surveys that were administered to the students and school personnel as indicated in Chapter 3 Methodology.

B.1 STUDENT SURVEYS

- What is your grade level?
 - A. 6th B. 7th C. 8th
- How often were you absent without an excuse 2015-16 school year?
 - A. 0-2 B. 3-6 C. 7-10 D. 11-15 E. 16 times or more
- The choices below show two main reasons why students try to come to school, check the box if it explains why you attend school:
 - There are things like my teachers, my friends, and/or activities at school that I look forward to.
 - It is really important to my family that I attend school and try my best.
- The choices below show two main reasons why students sometimes miss school, check the box if it explains why you sometimes do not attend school:
 - I am not really a school type of person. I don't really look forward to going to school or want to avoid things that happen at school.
 - In my family situation, sometimes it's difficult to go to school.
- What were the reasons that you missed school? (Please check all that apply.)
 - A. Doctor's Appointment B. Overslept
 - C. Missed Bus D. Bus issues (for example: I get sick on the bus)

- E. School Phobia (for example: I get anxious coming to school)
- F. Did not do homework G. Bullying
- H. Partying with friends I. Poor relationship with teachers
- J. School Safety K. Suspension
- L. Other- please list M. I did not miss school
- Have you ever been cited for truancy and gone before the District Magistrate?
 - A. Yes B. No
- If so, what was the consequence determined by the Magistrate?
 - A. Probation B. Dismissed C. Fines less than \$25
 - D. Fines between \$26 & \$50 E. Fines between \$51 & \$100
 - F. Fines between \$101 & \$150 G. Fines >\$151
- Among your friends, what are the top 3 reasons students are sometimes absent?
 - A. Doctor's Appointment B. Overslept
 - C. Missed Bus D. Bus issues (for example: I get sick on the bus)
 - E. School Phobia (for example: I get anxious coming to school)
 - F. Did not do homework G. Bullying
 - H. Partying with friends I. Poor relationship with teachers
 - J. School Safety K. Suspension
 - L. Other- please list M. They did not miss school
- Do you think student absenteeism is a problem?
 - A. Yes B. No
- Why or why not?
 - Open ended
- Is the school doing enough to get students to attend school?
 - A. Yes B. No
- What could the school do to get the students to attend regularly?
 - Open Ended
- Do you have any additional comments to student attendance and what can be done to improve it?
 - Open Ended

B.2 TEACHER SURVEYS

- Do you see student absenteeism, particularly unexcused absences, to be an issue?
 - A. Yes B. No
- Why or why not?
 - Open ended
- Are you aware of the school district's policy towards student attendance?
 - A. Yes B. No

- Does your school have a procedure for addressing high rates of absenteeism (i.e., 10 or more days absent)?
 - A. Yes B. No
- Do you see maintaining high attendance rates, even among students who struggle with attendance, as one of your core job responsibilities?
 - Yes, it is definitely my responsibility to promote high attendance
 - I have some responsibility to promote attendance, but that's not one of my main duties
 - No, it is really not my responsibility to promote high attendance
- Regardless of what you see as your responsibility, how much influence/impact do you have on students who struggle with attendance?
 - I have a great deal of influence on improving attendance among struggling students
 - I have some influence on improving attendance among struggling students
 - I have little or no influence on improving attendance among struggling students
- List any steps you took as an intervention to combat truancy for students in your classroom.
 - Open Ended
- In general, which of the following categories of factors do you think are most important in affecting student attendance? Please number each choice from 1 to 4, where 1 is the "most important factor" and 4 is the "least important factor":
 - *Pull factors at school*: The presence or absence of positive factors at school (e.g. teachers, friends, and/or activities at school that students look forward to).
 - *Push factors at school*: Negative school experiences like bullying, academic anxiety, or boredom.
 - *Push factors at home*: A positive emphasis on the importance of attending and doing well in school.
 - *Pull factors at home*: a family situation that sometimes makes it difficult to go to school.
- In your opinion, which of the following contribute to truancy? (Please check all that apply.)
 - A. Doctor's Appointment B. Overslept
 - C. Missed Bus D. Bus issues (for example: I get sick on the bus)
 - E. School Phobia (for example: I get anxious coming to school)
 - F. Did not do homework G. Bullying
 - H. Partying with friends I. Poor relationship with teachers
 - J. School Safety K. Suspension
 - L. Other- please list M. They did not miss school
- Please describe what you feel could be done to improve attendance in the school.
 - Open Ended

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEWS

The following are the three interviews that were administered to the students and school personnel as indicated in Chapter 3 Methodology.

C.1 STUDENT INTERVIEWS

- How often are you absent from school?
- Why are you absent from school?
- What has the school done to encourage you to come to school? (may require prompting)
- Have any of the interventions worked? Why or why not?
- What could the school do to encourage you to improve your attendance?

C.2 PARENT INTERVIEWS

- How often is your child absent from school? Do you know each time your child is absent? How do you know?
- Why is your child absent from school?
- What have you done to get your child to improve their attendance?
- What has the school done to get your child to improve their attendance?
- Has anything you have tried or the school has tried to get your child to improve their attendance been successful? Why or why not?
- Is there anything you can add about your experience with your child's attendance or lack thereof?

C.3 SCHOOL PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS

- What is your role in the school? Do you deal with student absences as part of your job at the school district?
- Do you see truancy as an issue that needs to be addressed?
- What happens when students are absent from your class? Is there a procedure that you follow?
- Do the students tell you why they are absent? What are the most common reasons?
- What interventions have you applied or the school to get the students to attend more frequently? Why do you think they worked and what did not work?
- What could the school do to encourage students to come to school more regularly?

- Is there anything you can add about your experience with student truancy?

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL

8/29/2016

<https://www.osiris.pitt.edu/osiris/Doc/SGO2F1MPGQB492UJJQHUMI60B/fromString.html>



University of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

3500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 383-1480
(412) 383-1508 (fax)
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

Memorandum

To: Rachel Andler-McCloy
From: IRB Office
Date: 8/29/2016
IRB#: PRO16060700
Subject: Student truancy in an economically disadvantaged middle school: A case study of the root causes and interventions applied

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study by the expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. Your research study was approved under:

45 CFR 46.110.(5)
45 CFR 46.110.(7)

The risk level designation is Minimal Risk.

Approval Date: 8/29/2016
Expiration Date: 8/28/2017

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA00006790 (University of Pittsburgh), FWA00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), FWA00000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh), FWA00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

<https://www.osiris.pitt.edu/osiris/Doc/SGO2F1MPGQB492UJJQHUMI60B/fromString.html>

1/2

Figure 7. IRB Approval

APPENDIX E

DEMONSTRATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATION MEETING

District

- Prior to 2017-18 school year, administration should meet with the local magistrate on expectations and requirements for truancy citations.
 - o Revise school district's attendance policy:
 - Warning- after 3 unexcused absences. Must include potential consequences should the behavior continue.
 - School Attendance Improvement Conference- after 6 unexcused absences. Must include student, admin, guidance counselor, parents/guardians, and other pertinent members. A document that outlines the plan of action to improve attendance with signatures must be completed. A template is being completed by PDE at this time.
 - Citation- if the plan is not successful, the school may file truancy citations with the plan attached. The magistrate will not uphold the citations without it.
 - If the student is 15 or younger, only the parent/guardians will be cited.
 - If the student is older than 15, both the child and parents/guardians will be cited.
 - It should also state the Children Youth Services could be notified if attendance does not improve.
 - Revised policy should be board approved with two readings prior to the start of the 2017-18 school year. All staff should be trained on the new procedures.
 - o Personnel adjustments:
 - Social worker/home school visitor: Look at ways for the guidance counselors to assist as home school visitors given the amount of responsibility that impacts the amount of time the social worker has available.

- Utilize the attendance clerk as the person responsible for data entry for McKinney-Vento students instead of the social worker.
- List of community agencies and services: guidance counselors and social worker should develop a running list updated on a semester-basis on the agencies available and the resources they provide. The list should include local, county, and state agencies that could assist families.

School

- Initiate a program like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to address school culture.
- Reach out and connect with the IU 1 and PaTTAN consultants on process and procedure.

APPENDIX F

DEMONSTRATION: MEETING DISCUSSION NOTES

Recommendation 1: Policy Revisions

- The revisions to the policy will be accepted. Each principal discussed who was going to be on the School Attendance Improvement Conference Team.
 - o BAHS: Principal, guidance counselor, social worker/home school visitor, 2 SAP team members (teachers and/or nurse)
 - o BAMS: Principal, guidance counselor, nurse, 2 SAP team members
 - o BAES: Principal, guidance counselor, school psychologist, 2 SAP team members
 - o Once the template was released, they would meet again to determine the format of the conferences.
 - o Each administrator expressed great concern for the amount of additional time required with limited personnel. They recommended to the superintendent that an assistant principal or home school visitor to go between all three buildings would be able to handle the added workflow and ensure coordination across the district.
- The new policy would be sent to the board in May for the first reading and June for the second reading so that policy would be in place for August.
- Staff would be trained at the August building level meetings by the principals.

Recommendation 2: Personnel Adjustments

- The guidance counselors would work with the social worker on students requiring home visits. One principal suggested the guidance counselor of the building take on every third student in an effort to create time but not overwhelm either of the personnel since the guidance counselor in each building already has a full plate.
- Given the attendance clerk is part-time between two schools and the increased documentation required for truant students, none of the principals felt that person could take on more responsibility. It would also run a risk of a grievance by the union

considering the position went from full-time to part-time two years ago. The union is trying to return the position to full-time due to the work load.

- The administration shared the same concern from the first recommendation. There exists a new for a home school visitor to take on the role and help support both the guidance counselor and social worker as well as the attendance clerk, minimizing the union's concern.

Recommendation 3: Community Resources/Agencies

- All of the administration felt this was an easy recommendation to implement as each guidance counselor has a set of agencies and contacts that they already utilize. This would require communication between all of the guidance counselors and social worker to ensure that all parties have the same list and that it is complete as well as seeking out additional resources that they may be unaware of.

Recommendation 4: School Culture- PBIS

- The elementary principal has plans to begin implementation of PBIS in 2017-18 as part of the schoolwide plan for federal programs.
- The middle school principal indicated that he would join the elementary at the administrative overview meeting at the end of the school year to gather more information and determine how to proceed.
- It was agreed upon by all participants that the culture of the middle school needed to be addressed in order to move forward on any front.
- The administrators felt that it would require time, money, and buy-in. While a difficult path, it was not unattainable. The elementary principal highlighted that it needed to be carefully planned prior to implementation to ensure that it could be sustainable.
- An administrator overview meeting is scheduled with the IU 1 consultant prior to the end of the school year.

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